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Introduction

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's latest collaborative project, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenges to Western Thought*, begins by setting out a very strong claim. This claim is that the findings of cognitive science "require a thorough rethinking of the most popular current [philosophical] approaches, namely Anglo-American analytic philosophy and postmodernist philosophy."[1] The three key findings of cognitive science on which Lakoff and Johnson base their analysis are:

(1) The mind is inherently embodied.
(2) Thought is mostly unconscious.
(3) Abstract concepts are largely metaphorical.

They write, "This book asks: What would happen if we started with these empirical discoveries about the nature of the mind and constructed philosophy anew?"[2] In this essay, I will focus particularly on their reconstruction of morality based on cognitive science. Lakoff and Johnson explain morality in terms of embodiment and conceptual metaphor. Their primary thesis about morality is that "our very idea of what morality is comes from those systems of metaphors that are grounded in and constrained by our experience of physical well-being and functioning."[3] By examining common but often unconscious conceptual metaphors like "Well-Being is Wealth," argue Lakoff and Johnson, we can learn a great deal of where morality comes from and what the empirical constraints on moral thought are.

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[1] Johnson, Mark and Lakoff, George. *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought*. New York: Basic Books, 1999, 3.
[2] Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, 3.
[3] Ibid, 331.

I will begin by outlining Lakoff and Johnson's theory of language and metaphor, and its implication for morality. While I find their theory in many ways insightful, I hope to chart some directions their theory could take in further dealing with the problem of making normative moral claims in an antifoundational context, drawing on ecofeminist philosophy and particularly Karen Warren's work on "care-sensitive ethics." I will then discuss Lakoff and Johnson's treatment of morality in light of the work of Richard Rorty and bell hooks in hopes of pointing out some of the limitations of their cognitive science-based theory.

Lakoff and Johnson on Language and Metaphor

To understand Lakoff and Johnson's theory of morality, it will be immensely helpful to first go over their general theory of language. They term their basic theory the Integrated Theory of Primary Metaphor, which they explain in the following way:

> We acquire a large system of primary metaphors automatically and unconsciously simply by functioning in the most ordinary of ways in the everyday world from our earliest years...Because of the way neural connections are formed during this period of conflation, we all naturally think using hundreds of primary metaphors.[4]

These *primary* or *conceptual* metaphors, the result of "cross-domain mapping," are essential to thought itself. Lakoff and Johnson give the example of the "Knowledge is Seeing" metaphor, visible in such sentences as "I see what you mean." They argue that conceptual metaphors come about due to a process of conflation. The "Knowledge is Seeing" metaphor is learned in contexts where the two events occur together, for example when *seeing* inside a box means *knowing* what's inside the box. Once this connection has formed, the two concepts continue to be conflated even when the two domains are no longer coactive, as in

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[4] Ibid., 47.

"I see what you mean."[5] Other conceptual metaphors analyzed by Lakoff and Johnson include More is Up, as in "The prices are high," and Understanding is Grasping, as in "I've never been able to grasp transfinite numbers."[6] Each metaphor is analyzed in terms of a "Subjective Judgment" and a "Sensorimotor Domain." In the Understanding is Grasping metaphor, the subjective judgment of "comprehension" is conflated with the sensorimotor domain of "object manipulation." Lakoff and Johnson argue that this metaphor comes from the primary experience of "Getting information about an object by grasping and manipulating it."[7] They key point here is that they want to consistently tie conceptual metaphors to embodied experience.

Lakoff and Johnson on Morality and Metaphor

When it comes to morality, Lakoff and Johnson apply their theory of embodiment and conceptual metaphor to metaphors they find common in moral discourse. Their basic thesis is that "the source domains of our metaphors for morality are typically based on what people over history and across cultures have seen as contributing to their well-being."[8] Though they think there are about two dozen common moral metaphors, three seem particularly prevalent. These metaphors are Well-Being is Wealth (Moral Accounting), Moral Authority is Parental Authority, and Morality is Strength. In the Moral Accounting metaphor, "Happiness is conceived as a valuable commodity or substance that we can have more or less of, that we can earn, deserve, or lose."[9] In the case of reciprocity, this metaphor allows us to conceptualize morality in such a way that "If you do something good for me, I *owe* you something, I am *in your debt*." In the case of altruism, on the other hand, "If I do something good for you…I cancel the debt…I nonetheless build up moral credit." According

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[5] Ibid., 49.
[6] Ibid., 50-54.
[7] Ibid., 54.
[8] Ibid., 290.
[9] Ibid., 292.

to this metaphor, "Justice is understood as fairness," that is, when the moral accounting books are balanced.[10]

The Moral Strength metaphor holds evil to be a force that brings one Low, whereas in doing good one remains Upright. The Moral Authority metaphor conceives of the parent as the authority figure, the child as the moral agent, and obedience as morality. Lakoff and Johnson are particularly interested in the impact of family relations on morality. They write, "it is models of the family that order our metaphors for morality into relatively coherent ethical perspectives by which we live our lives."[11] We might conceive of God or Reason as a strict Father, where the human will must be used in accordance with a universal moral order. Alternately, we might conceive of God or Feeling as a nurturant parent and base morality on an empathy that moves us toward acting for the well-being of others.[12]

Normative Claims and Care-Sensitive Ethics

Up to this point, I have provided an analysis of how Lakoff and Johnson see language, and particularly moral language, to work. However, a great problem looms over their analysis: Can their descriptive claims about how morality functions have any bearing on normative moral theory? In other words, can they turn an "is" into and "ought?" Lakoff and Johnson anticipate the objection that cognitive science can have no bearing on normative moral theory:

> "the assertion that empirical knowledge of our moral cognition can have no normative implications...is based on a false dichotomy between facts and values. Owen Flanagan (1991) has demonstrated the relevance of moral psychology for moral theory by showing that no morality can be adequate if it is

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[10] Ibid., 293-296.
[11] Ibid., 313.
[12] Ibid., 318-19.

> inconsistent with what we know about moral development, emotions, gender differences, and self-identity."[13]

I think they are right that we cannot legitimately ask someone, in the name of morality or ethics, to do something that is cognitively impossible. Nevertheless, they don't seem to get very far in terms of constructive ethics, either in addressing issues of justification for moral statements or somehow dissolving the need for justification. While they are right that empirical discoveries might have *bearing* on the normative claims we make, they do not discuss how their theory might *generate* normative claims in the first place. Their claims are basically critical ones. For example, the prevalence of moral metaphors grounded in sensory, physical domains forces them to dismiss the notion of a pure domain called "morality" or "ethics." A more concrete example of their method is their critique of the Strict Father model of morality: "Evidence from three areas of psychological research – attachment theory, socialization theory, and family violence studies – shows that the Strict Father model does not, in fact, produce the kind of child that it is supposed to foster."[14] Rather than resulting in children who are morally strong, independent, autonomous, and respectful of others, they argue, the Strict Father model tends to produce children who are dependent on others, cannot chart a moral course for themselves, and are less respectful of others. Note the criteria here: their criticism is dependent on the internal goal of the Strict Father model itself. Their theory lends itself well to analyzing the internal coherence of a moral theory. It would have more trouble, it seems, negotiating between two coherent systems of normative claims.

Before providing some objections to their view, I would like to suggest a direction that they seem pointed toward, were they to be more explicit about the generation and analysis of normative claims. For several reasons, they seem headed toward what has been called a "care-sensitive ethic." This type of ethic is

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[13] Ibid., 326.
[14] Ibid., 327.

defended by Karen Warren in *Ecofeminist Philosophy*. Lakoff and Johnson share Warren's requirement that ethics be based in human psychology. Likewise, Lakoff and Johnson share Warren's general criticism of an absolute duality between "reason" and "emotion." Both draw on the work of Antonio Damasio, who has shown that brain damage which cripples the emotional centers of the brain also cripples people's ability to reason morally.

Warren's care-sensitive ethic emerges from a larger debate "care vs. justice" debate fueled principally by feminist scholarship. Characterizing the "ethic of care" as it appears in the work of Carol Gilligan, Flanagan and Jackson write, "Whereas justice as fairness involves seeing others thinly, as worthy of respect purely by virtue of common humanity, morally good caring requires seeing others thickly, as constituted by their particular human face, their particular psychological and social self."[15] Warren formulates the ethical relevance of care in her "ability-to-care condition," which postulates that "The ability to care about oneself and others is a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for moral motivation and reasoning."[16]

Warren's ability to care, I think, goes along much the same lines as Lakoff and Johnson's realization that there can be psychological limits on normative ethical claims. However, Warren goes further and argues that the ability-to-care condition is not enough "as a criterion for assessing the appropriateness of any given ethical principle in a given context."[17] She comes to the conclusion (with which I agree) that the is-ought problem really is a problem. To bridge this gap, she adds a normative premise: our ethical decisions should be in line with "care practices," defined as practices "that either maintain, promote, or enhance the health

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[15] Flanagan, Owen and Jackson, Kathryn. "Justice, Care, and Gender" in *An Ethic of Care*, ed. Mary Jeanne Larrabee. New York: Routledge, 1993, 70.

[16] Warren, Karen. *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000, 111.

[17] Warren, *Ecofeminist Philosophy*, 112.

(well-being, flourishing) of relevant parties, or at least do not cause unnecessary harm to the health (well-being, flourishing) of relevant parties." As to the skeptic's resultant question, "Why care?" she answers that "there is no answer that will not satisfy one who does not accept moral reasons as bona fide reasons."[18] Though Warren's viewpoint is decidedly antifoundationalist, she provides us with a normative premise and hence a sufficient, not simply necessary, condition for moral action that is lacking in Lakoff and Johnson.

Warren's "care-practices" condition is a grounding, though not an absolute rational foundation, from which ethical theorizing can begin. Whereas we have seen that Lakoff and Johnson's theory is most useful for analyzing metaphors in terms of their internal coherence (as in the Strict Father model of morality), Warren's overt commitment to care practices allow her to critique certain metaphors from the outside. Ecofeminists are particularly critical of many uses of the "Nature as Woman" metaphor. Warren writes

> Mother Nature (not Father Nature) is raped, mastered, controlled, conquered, mined. Her (not his) secrets are penetrated and her womb (men don't have one) is put into the service of the man of science (not woman of science, or simply scientist). Virgin timber is felled, cut down. Fertile (not potent) soil is tilled, and land that lies fallow is useless or barren, like a woman unable to conceive a child.[19]

Warren thinks that the "Nature as Woman" metaphor justifies the exploitation of nature and animals by comparing them to women, and vice versa. Whereas Lakoff and Johnson provide us with the tools to appreciate and learn from our moral metaphors, Warren is more concerned with critiquing certain metaphors from an ethical standpoint. Warren's "care-sensitive ethics," I think, could be easily incorporated into Lakoff and Johnson's work on metaphor

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[18] Ibid., 112-14.
[19] Ibid., 27.

and morality, were they to concentrate more on the genuine problem of making normative claims out of descriptive analysis.

Richard Rorty

I will now look at the arguments about morality and language/metaphor presented in *Philosophy in the Flesh* in terms of Richard Rorty's thought on the contingency of language and community. Lakoff and Johnson are willing to compromise with both Rotry and poststructuralist theory on at least one point: "Universals and meanings are widespread across cultures, but there is also significant relativism."[20] Their theory of conceptual metaphor does not require the absolute universality of any particular conceptual metaphor. Nevertheless, they diverge with Rorty on one crucial point, claiming that:

> [Rorty's meaning holism] must see mind and language as disembodied. Without an embodied notion of meaning that can allow for meaning to be determined through bodily experience, his only choice is to completely accept relativity, utter historical contingency, and a coherence theory of truth.[21]

I wish to in some ways to defend Rorty against the claim that his theory of contingency necessarily disembodies the mind. I would characterize the disagreement between Rorty and Lakoff-Johnson as a disagreement over how to talk about metaphor.

Rorty is quite happy to talk about the mind as embodied, as when he playfully hypothesizes that the amazing new languages generated by Aristotle, Saint Paul, and Newton might have resulted from "cosmic rays scrambling the fine structures of some crucial neurons in their respective brains."[22] However, we need to keep in mind the heavy influence of Davidson's theory of metaphor on Rorty's thought. Because Davidson differs with

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[20] Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, 467.
[21] Ibid., 461.
[22] Rorty, Richard. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989, 17.

Lakoff and Johnson on the possibility of metaphorical *meaning*, they have different conceptions of what counts as metaphor. What counts as a "conceptual metaphor" with embodied meaning for Lakoff and Johnson, Davidson would classify as a "dead metaphor." For Davidson, metaphor is still a trope, not a system of meaning that underlies our basic though processes. Metaphor, in his view, is characterized by its use, which is making us "see one thing as another by making some literal statement that inspires or prompts the insight."[23] Hence, metaphor is not a function of the cognitive unconscious as Lakoff and Johnson would have it, but is characterized by Davidson as a primarily conscious process. Metaphors only become interesting if the audience finds something surprising about them.

Returning to Rorty: I think that Rorty would find Lakoff and Johnson's observations about conceptual metaphors arising from embodied experience not wrong so much as uninteresting, at least in terms of concerns about solidarity (Rorty's term that comes closest to concerns about "ethics" or "morality"). Insofar as our conceptual metaphors regarding morality are widespread or universal, a Rortian response would find them unhelpful. Rorty writes, "All beliefs which *are* central to a person's self-image are so because their presence or absence serves as a criterion for dividing good people from bad people…A conviction which can be justified to *anyone* is of little interest."[24] Rorty's point is that, insofar as human beings share something in common (for example conceptual metaphors) there is no need to create solidarity. Moral belief and justification are contested insofar as we do *not* share a language of common conviction. Rorty's ideal liberal ironists are very aware of our lack of a common language. They "are able to recognize the contingency of the vocabulary in which they state their highest hopes – the contingency of their own consciences –

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[23] Davidson, Donald. "What Metaphors Mean" in *The Philosophy of Language* [4th ed.], ed. A. P. Martinich. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, 445.

[24] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 47.

and yet have remained faithful to those consciences."[25] But when Rorty says that our languages and our very selves are historically contingent, I don't think he necessarily denies the embodiment of the mind or the possibility that humans share some traits in common. Rather, he points to the fact that, insofar as our values are up for grabs, we will not be able to find a common human language to adjudicate differences of value and belief based on a common criterion.

bell hooks and Location

To provide a final framework for evaluating Lakoff and Johnson's argument for the relevance of cognitive science to morality, I turn to black feminist writer bell hooks. hooks uses the metaphors of "space" and "location" to talk about oppression and marginality in language. She writes, "Language is also a place of struggle. The oppressed struggle in language to recover ourselves, to reconcile, to renew."[26] This need for a counter-language, argues bell hooks, comes out of experiences of marginalization such as racism, sexism, and classism. How does Lakoff and Johnson's positions relate to experiences of oppression and marginality?

Lakoff and Johnson tend to focus on the development of conceptual metaphors in children, since that is when they think the crucial process of conflation and cross-domain mapping occurs. However, this way of studying language runs the risk of being too individualistic. While our bodies and early development may give rise to moral metaphors, such as Moral Authority is Parental Authority, moral discourse cannot be reduced to these metaphors or to experiences common to most people. When hooks talks about a language about marginality that comes from "lived experience,"[27] she is not talking about experiences that we share more or less equally, but experiences of oppressed groups. The

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[25] Ibid., 46.

[26] hooks, bell. *Yearning: race, gender, and cultural politics*. Boston, MA: South End Press, 1990, 146.

[27] hooks, *Yearning*, 150.

danger of the cognitive science approach to moral discourse is that it focuses too heavily on early development, and not on cumulative experiences of marginality and the continued struggle by oppressed groups to articulate that marginality.

Conclusion

While I can accept many of Lakoff and Johnson's observations regarding the phenomenon they term "conceptual metaphors," I have chosen to partially contest the conclusions they draw from these observations in the area of moral discourse. Their theory can be very helpful as a tool to critique notions of morality that require positions that are cognitively or psychologically impossible for human beings. However, they do not delve deeply enough into the problem of normative claims to build a constructive moral theory. If they were to argue in favor of a specific moral theory, I think Karen Warren's "care-sensitive" ethics would be a profitable route. I have also argued that in some ways, conceptual metaphors are irrelevant to discourses that seek solidarity and a voice for the marginalized. Complex differences in belief, politics, and social position result even amid a widespread use of the same conceptual metaphors, and it is precisely these differences that are most relevant to moral action.

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