

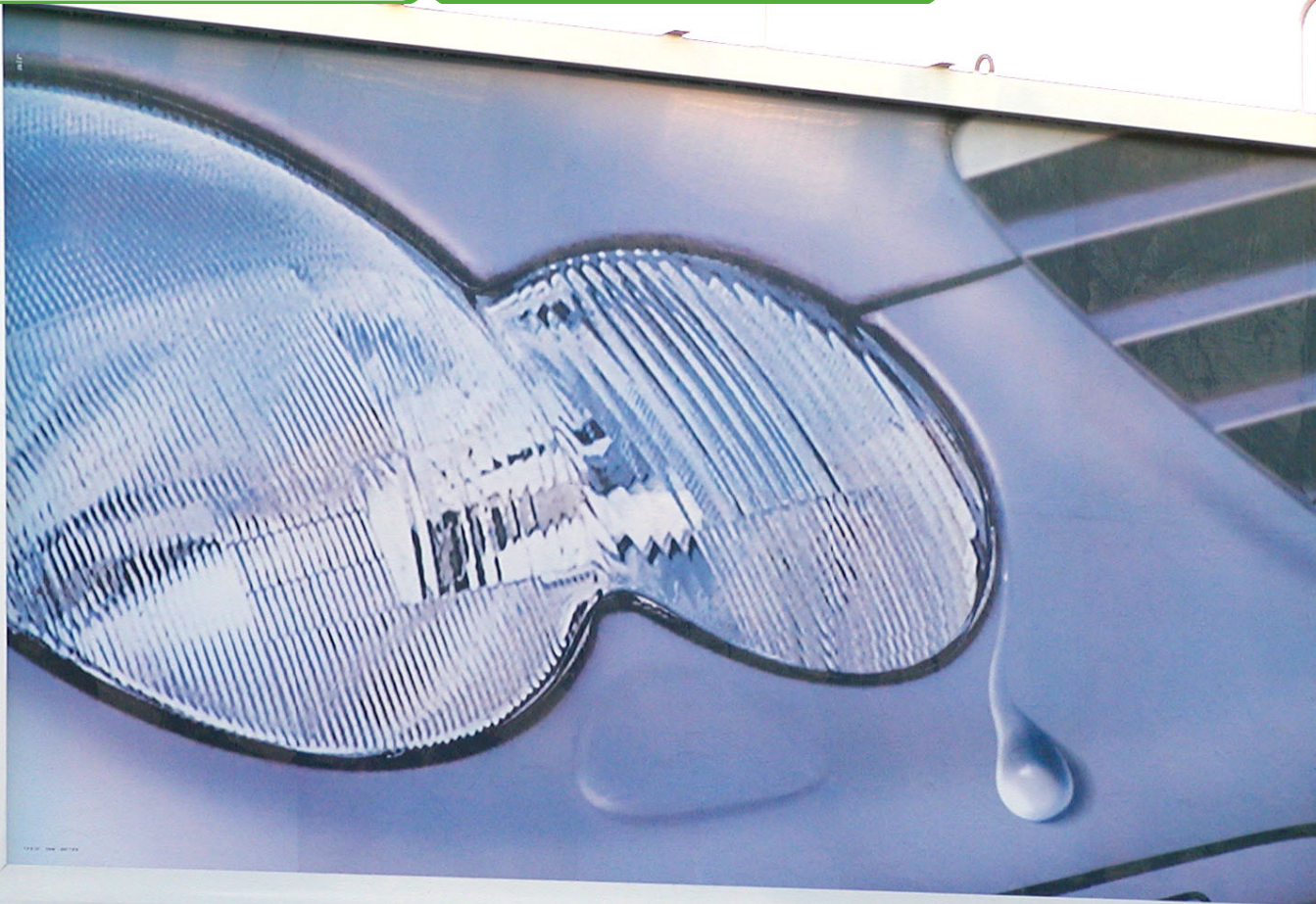
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LAKOFF and JOHNSON:  
Embodied metaphor

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Caption

## Lakoff and Johnson: metaphor and mind

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson are key figures in a re-evaluation by cognitive science of the whole basis of philosophy and, consequent on that, how we see the mind. The basis for this new perspective, and the deep challenge it presents for large swathes of science and, not least, mathematics, arises from the way that Lakoff and Johnson convincingly show that the mind is inherently embodied, that most thought is unconscious, and that the abstract notions that we use in daily life are usually metaphorical—that metaphor is a fundamental quality of the mind.

For Lakoff, ‘we are neural beings, our brains take their input from the rest of our bodies, what our bodies are like and how they function in the world thus structures the very concepts we can use to think. We cannot think just anything—only what our embodied brains permit. Anything we can think or understand is shaped by, made possible by, and limited by our bodies, brains, and our embodied reactions in the world’.

### Embodied philosophy

The consequences of this for our ideas of mind are far reaching. It contradicts the fundamental philosophical ideas of the last 2500 years that language is the manipulation of meaningless symbols (Chomsky); that mathematics exists independent of beings with bodies and brains and that mathematics structures the universe independently of any embodied beings to create the mathematics. Also, and very important for anyone interested in what counts as mind, Lakoff’s findings also pull the rug from under what he call ‘first generation “disembodied” cognitive science’. He shows that this early cognitive science, in which mind is studied in terms of

its cognitive functions, which means in terms of the operations it performs, i.e. independently of the brain and body (still the orthodoxy in that field), had philosophical assumptions that predetermined important parts of the content of the scientific ‘results’.

Lakoff shows that philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Descartes and Kant ‘take a small number of metaphors as eternal and self-evident truths and then, with rigorous logic and total systematicity, follow out the entailments of those metaphors to their conclusions wherever they lead. They lead to some pretty strange places.’ Plato’s metaphors entail that philosophers should govern the state. Aristotle’s metaphors entail that there are four causes and that there cannot be a vacuum. Descartes metaphors entail that the mind is completely disembodied and that all thought is conscious. Kant’s metaphors lead to the conclusions that there is a universal reason and that it dictates universal moral laws. Each of these philosophers took a commonplace metaphor and used the authority of rigorous logic to claim it as a universal truth.

One of the considerable virtues of Lakoff and Johnson’s research is that though highly technical, because it is thoroughly embodied, the topics it deals with and the consequences of the research are often very homely. I will fill out this sketch of their work by outlining some of the key elements of it, listing some of its consequences, and then give a brief account of what this fresh perspective on mind reveals about morality and politics.

### Categories

The pigeon-holing of things, people, events, and ideas

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based on common properties is a fundamental capacity of mind, and it has also been the principal theory of how we think and reason for more than two thousand years—we recognize a series of similar helpful acts from a person, and we categorize the person as a ‘friend’. Nothing is more basic to the way mind works, whenever we reason about kinds of things—mental health, cars, feelings, emotions, transport policy—we are using categories. Most categorization is automatic, especially of things which can give us the sense that things are ‘just as they are’. Categorization also deals with abstract entities, illness, aims, distance, or time, and Lakoff observes that an adequate account of how the mind works requires a perspective that accounts for both the mind's concrete and abstract categories.

Lakoff and Johnson dismiss as inadequate the classical view of categories that until 20 or 30 years ago took categorization for granted, as though it were intrinsic and natural, shaped philosophy, and which still shapes most of what we call common-sense. This inadequacy, as I have mentioned earlier, arises from the taken-for-granted notion that reason itself is disembodied and abstract—distinct, on the one hand, from perception and the body and culture, and on the other hand from the mechanisms of imagination, for example metaphor and mental imagery. Thus, names can be divorced from the entities that they point to.

**Full strength Categories**

Detailed empirical research across anthropology, linguistics, and psychology have lead Lakoff and Johnson to the notion of *prototype theory* which enables a deepening of our categorization into being ‘a matter of both human experi-

ence and imagination—of perception, motor activity and culture on the one hand, and of metaphor, metonymy and mental imagery on the other’. The folk theory of categories—common sense, amounts to a belief that ‘words can fit the world by virtue of their inherent meaning’, and secondly, that ‘there is some body of people in society who have the right to stipulate what words should designate, relative to some domain of expertise’. *Prototype theory* contradicts this by showing that words can fit the world with a different kind of precision, e.g. ‘loosely speaking’, or ‘strictly speaking’.

*Prototype theory* points to the tremendous value of the categories that define models of the mind being extended to include/reflect our lived experience, suggesting:

RADIAL: ‘mother’-adoptive mother, birth mother, foster mother, surrogate mother, step-mother;

IDEALS: e.g. ‘the ideal husband is a good provider, faithful, strong, respected, attractive’;

PARAGONS: e.g. Academy award winner, listed in the Guinness book of records;

SALIENT EXAMPLES: e.g. local experiences that are used to guess what will happen in the future;

SOCIAL STEREOTYPES: usually questionable or inaccurate generalizations about people, often in identifiable social or political or ethnic roles.

TYPICAL CASES: making judgements perhaps about what counts as ‘abnormal’ based on knowledge of the ‘normal’.

Once we accept that categories may be loose rather than tight, and because we are embodied, most of the key elements of relationship with ourselves and others are, as Lakoff and Johnson's research shows in great detail, articulated via metaphor. I'll give

some examples that give the flavour of this, and then end with a more detailed instance of the application of this line of inquiry to the human mind—the metaphoric basis of moral politics.

**Moral arithmetic**

The extent to which we may ‘reason’ in a highly unaware way is apparent from Lakoff’s unpicking of moral accounting. We commonly conceptualize well-being as wealth and changes in well-being as a gain, or a loss, or a cost, is it worth it? We ask, is a course of action likely to be profitable? Something qualitative (well-being) is envisioned in terms of something quantitative (money). So that I may feel that *I owe you something* or that *I am in your debt*, but if you cross me I might one day *make you pay for it*. In another situation I might feel *discredited* and *needing to build trust* so as to establish my *moral worth*.

As Lakoff and Johnson point out, the use of *owe*, *debt*, and *pay* so infuses the use of the ‘Well-Being as Wealth’ metaphor as to make it so fundamental an element of mind that we don’t notice it. In addition, as he shows, it supports other metaphors that have a profound effect on what counts as a sound, healthy, realistic approach to everyday matters as family life, child-care, government, political parties, crime, and the environment. And of course, in so far as we reason about the subjective subtleties of moral dilemmas using the metaphor of arithmetic, we may get into a lot of social and personal difficulty, not least polarized worldviews that find some other people inexplicable, wrong, bad, or even evil.

**Moral politics**

Partly as a way of consolidating the challenge to objectivist philosophy that his work entails, and partly as a way of

showing how this approach to mind illuminates even such mundane but essential aspects of daily life as politics, Lakoff shows how prototypical notions of conservative and liberal moral politics derive from the differing metaphors we use to shape family life.

**Ideal families**

He contrasts two ‘ideal’ approaches to child-care and family life—*Strict Father* and *Nurturant Parent*—and shows how, from each of them, a rich vein of very divergent priorities and beliefs emerges about an altogether different human domain: what constitutes morality.

**The Strict Father/Mother**

The Strict Father (or Strict Mother variant) approach to child-care gives a high priority to the metaphor of Moral Strength—being Good is Upright; being Bad is Low; Doing Evil is Falling; Evil is a Force; Morality is Strength. Moral Strength sees the world in terms of a war of Good against the forces of Evil, and it also requires self-discipline, self-denial, and self-reliance.

Lakoff pursues the notion of *Strict Father* through a series of associated metaphors:

MORAL AUTHORITY: authority figures set standards that must be obeyed and punish those who fail to meet them.

MORAL ORDER: corresponds to the natural order of dominance as it occurs in the world—God has moral authority over people, people have moral authority over nature, adults have moral authority over children, men have moral authority over women. (See also **Domination.**)

MORAL BOUNDARIES: sanctioned journeys, keeping to the straight and narrow, are OK; unsanctioned journeys, being led

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astray, or going off the beaten path is held to be deviant, and for the protection of the community such people should become outcasts.

**MORAL ESSENCE:** a person's character determines how they will act; a person's actions define their character.

**MORAL WHOLENESS:** rules are homogeneous and strictly defined—i.e. right and wrong, good and evil, moral and immoral, wholeness contrasts with degeneration, moral decay and falling standards.

**MORAL PURITY:** moral standards are threatened by impurity and so need to be purged of corrupting individuals.

**MORAL HEALTH:** impurities can also be a cause of illness so that deviance from the straight and narrow implies a sick mind. Since deviance is held to be contagious, segregated neighbourhoods and stiff prison sentences are essential.

**MORAL SELF-INTEREST:** if each of us maximizes our well-being the well-being of all will be maximized

**MORAL SELF-DEFENCE:** since the Strict Father moral system is correct, it is the moral duty of all adherents to defend it against attack. Since they are held to violate the natural order, homosexuality and feminism are especially dangerous.

I continue this broad-brush treatment of Lakoff's very detailed set of propositions about the *Strict Father* mind by turning to his notion of a second ideal family, *The Nurturant Parent*, and the way it influences morality. Originally a womanly perspective, as Lakoff notes, it seems to be increasingly preferred by both sexes.

### **The Nurturant Parent**

The *Nurturant Parent* approach to child-care gives a high priority to the metaphors of:

**MORALITY AS EMPATHY:** If you feel what another person

feels and if you want to experience a feeling of well-being, then you will want that person to experience a sense of well-being too, so you will act to promote it.

**MORALITY AS NURTURANCE:** Nurturance presupposes empathy, so it is projected on to society in general, seeing the community as a family. Doing good means being a nurturing parent, people needing help are children in need of nurturance, moral action is nurturance.

**MORAL SELF-NURTURANCE:** you can't care for others if you don't care for yourself—this is a moral necessity.

**MORALITY AS SOCIAL NURTURANCE:** attending to social ties is a moral requirement—it may call for sacrifices; if you can mend or maintain social ties you have a duty to do so and it is wrong to neglect them.

**MORALITY AS HAPPINESS:** cultivate your own happiness because unhappy people are less likely to be compassionate, i.e. empathic and nurturing, but pursuit of this must not hurt or harm anyone else.

**MORALITY AS SELF-DEVELOPMENT:** development of the human potential in oneself and others becomes a moral calling.

**MORALITY AS FAIR DISTRIBUTION:** playing by the rules determines what you get, you get what you have a right to.

**MORAL GROWTH:** nurturance promotes moral growth.

**MORAL STRENGTH:** having nurturance as a priority creates both virtues and failings: it favours social responsibility, generosity, respect for others, open-mindedness, pleasure, honesty and cooperativeness etc., with failings corresponding to a lack of these qualities.

**MORAL BOUNDARIES:** are defined by what would stop or inhibit nurturance.

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**MORAL SELF-INTEREST:** the violation of nurturant ethics is not in anyone's interests.

**MORAL AUTHORITY:** accumulates out of the demonstration of successful nurturance, rather than an ability to set and enforce rules; it is earned as trust.

### Mind and politics

Lakoff sees the *Strict Father* and *Nurturant Parent* approaches to child-care as defining a conservative and a liberal mind. He shows how, in approaching key political issues such as social programmes, taxes, regulation and the environment, crime, punishment, culture, and even Christianity, the two metaphors of morality define very divergent choices in how we organize personal and social life.

When he comes to consider the human mind specifically, Lakoff concludes that not only is the *Strict Father* morality out of touch with the realities of raising children but that it is out of touch with the realities of the human mind itself. Looked at in the fresh light of the recent research into categorization, he argues that the moral imperatives of the *Strict Father* Morality amount to trying to insist that naming and categories are precise and absolute, either/or; that moral rules are literal; that everyone has the same understanding of the moral rules; that everyone always seeks rewards and avoids punishment.

For Lakoff, the human mind does not work in this way: he claims we actually frame most of what we think in terms of metaphor, not literal fixed categories, and that moral training based on enforcing obedience fails because people are not reward/punishment machines.

The Nurturant Parent model is less contradictory of cur-

rent knowledge of how the mind works. Here compliance, or otherwise, with set categories, imperfect communication, and the ineffectiveness of reward/punishment isn't important because the Nurturant Parent morality deploys constant communication, interaction, and discussion, i.e. there is constant negotiation of meaning. The tightly refined rules of the *Strict Father* are replaced by a greater clarity of expectations and empathy; 'reward and punishment' is replaced by interdependence, communication, and the overarching desire to be well connected to our nearest and dearest.

The *Strict Father* morality has Moral Strength at the top of its value system, way ahead of Moral Empathy and Nurturance. The low priority for empathy with those outside the *Strict Father* system—the unemployed, homeless, unmarried mothers, and other 'deviants'—means that direct contact with the diversity of actual human lives is very restricted under *Strict Father* morality so that it tends to generate cultures of blame and exclusion.

*Nurturant Parent* morality has Moral Empathy at the head of its list of preferred values, and Lakoff claims that this tends to ensure that its adherents stay more in touch with individual human flourishing. Putting empathy first means that we put ourselves in the other person's shoes and therefore are not likely to do anything that would expose them to harm, illness, poverty, deterioration, etc.

Lakoff concludes that through encouraging the cooperation and mutuality in which the greatest numbers of citizens can live and work together productively, *Nurturant Parent* child-care is by far the better choice.

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