



ARTICLES

Conceptual Metaphor Theory as Methodology for Comparative Religion

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This article argues for the usefulness of a new methodology for the study of comparative religion, the analysis of conceptual metaphor, as well as for the advantages of the theoretical orientation in which it is grounded, “embodied realism.” The manner in which this methodology and theoretical orientation avoid some of the shortcomings of previous approaches to the study of comparative religion is discussed, with embodied realism being presented as a middle ground between Enlightenment realism and postmodern antirealism. It is argued that commonalities in human bodily experience can serve as a basis for cross-cultural commensurability while still providing room for difference and contingency. Finally, a brief analysis of the human rights debate with China is offered as an illustration of how the methodology of metaphor analysis might actually be applied, as well as its potential role in enabling cross-cultural dialogue on contentious religious issues.

THE THEORETICAL PLAUSIBILITY of the comparative religious project is, of course, an issue for those of us who do comparative religion for a living, but it is also—or at least should be—an issue of pressing public

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interest as well. This was forcibly brought home to me recently by an article in the *Los Angeles Times* about a new phenomenon being observed in mainland China: children taking their parents to court over issues such as negligent upbringing. The tone of the article was for the most part laudatory, with the subtext being that those backward Chinese were finally learning about the rule of law—discovering the universal, God-given right to sue that Americans hold so dear. Of course, *my* first thought, as a scholar of early Confucianism, was that Confucius must be spinning cartwheels in his grave. The idea of a child taking his or her parents to court would be so utterly horrifying to him—and, indeed, to any traditionally minded Chinese person—as to be almost incomprehensible.¹ To begin with, of course, there is the central importance in traditional China of filial piety (*xiao*) and other hierarchical family relationships, such as “obedience to elders” (*ti*)—literally, “being a good younger brother”—which constitute the basis of human morality and social order.² Added to this is a distaste for the assertion of what we in the modern West would consider basic legal rights. While recourse to lawyers and lawsuits is viewed by many of us as a crucial means of safeguarding our basic rights against other individuals, corporations, and the government, traditional Confucian society views litigation as a pathological symptom of social-moral breakdown.³

What I saw missing in this newspaper account (and, indeed, what seems to be lacking in almost all public discourse in the West concerning China and human rights) is the recognition that modern western liberalism—including the belief in an autonomous individual possessing universal reason and bearing inalienable rights—constitutes a religious worldview, not simply an objective description of reality. I am here following Charles Taylor (1989: 4–8) in understanding “religion” or “spirituality” in the broad sense of any framework of metaphysical claims that provides normative guidance, allowing us to make what Taylor terms “strong evaluations”: moral

¹ I will, for the moment, follow the convention of equating Confucianism with the traditional Chinese worldview and treating “Confucianism” as a unit rather than a complex and historically quite diverse phenomenon. This assumption will be questioned below.

² Consider, for instance, *Analects* 1.2: “A young person who is filial and respectful of his elders rarely becomes the kind of person who is inclined to defy his superiors, and there has never been a case of one who is disinclined to defy his superiors stirring up rebellion. The gentleman applies himself to the roots. ‘Once the roots are firmly established, the Way will grow.’ Might we not say that filial piety and respect for elders constitute the root of Goodness?”

³ Again, consider the reported view of Confucius regarding litigation in *Analects* 12.13: “In hearing litigation, I suppose I am as good as anyone else, but it would be best to bring it about that there were no litigation at all.” See also the relative weighting of family loyalty versus public law expressed in the famous story of “Upright Gong” in *Analects* 13.18.

judgments that go beyond mere expressions of personal preference because they are seen as making ontological claims about the world. This is an important insight, for—as Taylor (1989: chap. 3) and Robert Bellah et al. (especially chap. 1) have argued—many moral debates both within a given culture and between cultures are hampered by a lack of awareness on the part of the participants of the often implicit religious claims on which their positions are based. In the case of the human rights debate with China, most modern western liberals consider their views to be fully “secular” and fail to see that their belief in such things as human rights, rationality, individuality, freedom, separation of church and state, and so on are, in fact, based on an unspoken and mostly unconscious network of metaphysical claims that possesses normative value for them. Although the Founding Fathers of the United States may have viewed the truths of liberalism as self-evident, modern scholars of religion need to be more sophisticated and self-reflective.

When we understand modern liberalism as a kind of religion, asking whether or not Chinese “get” human rights or democracy is as inappropriate as asking whether or not they “get” the fact that Jesus Christ is Savior. What we should be asking instead is what the Chinese *do* believe, how it is different from what we believe, if they can understand our beliefs, and if there is a basis for conversation about it. As long as we fail to see our own religious commitments clearly, real dialogue will be impossible. Taylor makes this point in a piece entitled “Conditions of an Unforced Consensus on Human Rights”:

An obstacle in the path to . . . mutual understanding comes from the inability of many westerners to see their culture as one among many . . . To an extent, westerners see their human rights doctrine as arising simply out of the falling away of previous countervailing ideas . . . that have now been discredited to leave the field free for the preoccupations with human life, freedom, and the avoidance of suffering. To this extent they will tend to think that the path to convergence requires that others too cast off their traditional ideas, that they even reject their religious heritage, and become “unmarked” moderns like us. Only if we in the West can recapture a more adequate view of our own history can we learn to understand the spiritual ideas that have been interwoven in our development and hence be prepared to understand sympathetically the spiritual paths of others toward the converging goal. (1999: 143–144)

This job of making both our own and other cultures’ value commitments explicit falls to scholars of comparative religion.

This observation that human rights and the ideals of liberalism are products of a particular religious culture has not gone entirely unexpressed in public discourse and has, in fact, served as one of the basic arguments

of Asian governmental bodies in defense of their “failure” to safeguard or respect what the West considers basic human rights.⁴ This argument has generally been dismissed as self-serving sophism by most in the West, but there are some scholars of comparative religion who have made a genuine attempt to grapple with it. If we want to very roughly classify the vast literature that has grown up around this subject, then we might put in one camp such western scholars of Confucianism as Henry Rosemont Jr. and Roger Ames, who have argued not only that traditional Confucian views of the self are fundamentally incompatible with modern liberal rights talk but that this more “communitarian” Confucian view of the self can help serve as a corrective to some of the excesses of modern western liberalism.⁵ Another camp agrees with Rosemont and Ames that Confucianism, like traditional religious worldviews in the West, is antithetical to the modern liberal view of the self but argues that this is precisely why East Asia should abandon—and, in fact, gradually *is* abandoning—its older religious traditions and embracing modernity, democracy, and capitalism.⁶ Finally, there are those who see in traditional Confucianism precursors to modern liberal ideals such as human rights or popular sovereignty and argue that the Chinese cultural sphere can call on these resources to develop something that looks like a liberal democratic culture, perhaps with a uniquely East Asian quality.⁷

One issue that is rarely explicitly addressed in these discussions, however, is one that will serve as the primary focus of this article: that of theory and methodology. In other words, how are we to actually go about comparing religious worldviews, and on what basis is such comparison possible?

THEORIES AND METHODS IN COMPARATIVE RELIGION

We might very roughly classify the theoretical orientations of those who engage in comparative religion by sketching out the two extremes, which I label “Enlightenment realism” and “postmodern antirealism.” The Enlightenment realist stance most closely characterizes the commonsense view of most western nonacademics as well as of those academics working in the natural and social sciences. In this model there is one objective

⁴ The reader is referred, e.g., to the notorious “Bangkok Declaration” (reproduced in Davis: 205–209) and the views of Lee Kuan Yew, former prime minister of Singapore, and other prominent Chinese thinkers who view Confucianism as a safeguard against the forces of “western decadence” (see the discussion in De Bary 1998: x–xiv).

⁵ See Rosemont 1988, 1998, and Ames 1988: 212–214. Also cf. Daniel Bell’s criticism of “West-centric” perspectives.

⁶ See, for instance, Ng, Donnelly, and Friedman.

⁷ For just a few examples, see Du and Song, most of the essays in De Bary and Tu, and Chan.

description of reality independent of us as observers, and we are epistemologically capable of comprehending this description and accurately formulating it in language. With regard to the human rights debate, the realists assume that the modern western liberal worldview is the most accurate description of reality that we possess, one that has developed inexorably with the advance of human knowledge and is universally applicable regardless of cultural differences. Jack Donnelly (69) exemplifies this attitude best with his argument that the “discovery” of human rights is no more culturally contingent than the discovery of Newtonian or quantum physics and, thus, no less applicable to East Asia than to the West. For extreme postmodern antirealists, on the other hand, all ideas are constructed and therefore historically, culturally, and linguistically contingent. This means that different traditions are radically incommensurable, which in turn means that any kind of genuine dialogue is impossible. Under this view, human rights and other liberal ideals arose along with capitalism and urban industrialism in Northern Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and are in the process of being gradually imposed on the rest of the world—either through military force or, more commonly, as an inextricable part of the package deal that includes Coca-Cola, advanced weapons systems, Hollywood movies, and the other wonders of western industrial capitalism. Of course, few scholars of comparative religion hold to either of these stances in their extreme form, and, in fact, much of the literature in the field is dedicated to breaking down this dichotomy and formulating some sort of middle position.⁸ The categories are nonetheless helpful for heuristic purposes.

As for methods, we might similarly outline two extremes among a wide variety of approaches. One method for conducting comparative work that was previously more common but is now falling out of favor is what I term the “word fetishism” approach. This methodology is ultimately based on the kind of linguistic determinism made famous by Whorf and Sapir, which assumes that in order to have a given concept a culture must have a lexical item for it. In practice, it involves taking a term such as *human rights* or *freedom* from the source language (e.g., English) and then searching for an “equivalent” in the target language (e.g., classical Chinese). The presence of an equivalent or near-equivalent term in the target language is then held up as evidence of conceptual convergence, or failure to find an equivalent or near-equivalent word is cited as evidence for some sort of deep cognitive incommensurability. With regard to the

⁸ For two examples, see Twiss and Taylor 1999.

human rights issue, a few scholars have tried scouring the traditional Confucian corpus for terms that might correspond roughly to *human rights* or *democracy* but without much success. The fact that there is apparently no word in either classical or modern Chinese that exactly corresponds to *human rights* or *democracy* thus gives ammunition to the antirealist camp.⁹ The basic problem with this approach, however, is that the sort of crude linguistic determinism on which it is based is not terribly plausible as a model for human cognition. The Whorf–Sapir hypothesis has been more or less discredited in the linguistics community, and the simple reflection that classical Chinese did not have words for *economy* or *truth*—although ancient China certainly had an economy, and early Chinese speakers spent an inordinate amount of time trying to prove that their claims corresponded to reality, whereas those of their philosophical opponents did not—is enough to call the word fetishism approach into question.

A more common approach nowadays is to undertake comparison at the theoretical level. In this approach, a particular philosophical theory is taken from the source culture and compared with a philosophical theory from the target culture. A presence or lack of fit between these theories is then taken to represent conceptual commensurability or incommensurability.¹⁰ When it comes to the human rights issue, the source theory is generally the modern liberal theory of the self and the self's relationship to society, and scholars employing this approach often dedicate their efforts to finding equivalents in early Chinese texts for the liberal ideals of personal autonomy, individual human dignity, freedom of speech, and “democracy” in some broad sense. Although none of the Enlightenment realists employing this approach would argue that ancient China had anything like a modern western liberal theory of representative democracy, many believe that they can find in early texts the conceptual resources for such a theory. The fourth-century B.C.E. Confucian text called the *Mencius* tends to be the favored hunting ground, and scholars have claimed to find there and in other classical and neo-Confucian texts recognizable ideas of “popular sovereignty,” “human dignity,” and “human equality.”¹¹ The fact that China did not, in fact, develop a liberal,

⁹ Although Henry Rosemont primarily employs a theory-based methodology, his observation that classical Chinese lacks the lexical item for *moral* or *morality* (as well as for *freedom*, *liberty*, *autonomy*, *rights*, etc.) and his subsequent conclusion that “speakers of languages having no term corresponding to *moral* cannot logically have any *moral* principles or theories” (1988: 172) exemplify the word fetishism approach.

¹⁰ The boundary between the theoretical and word fetishism approaches is often blurred in practice by the fact that a lack of shared technical vocabulary is commonly cited as evidence for theoretical incommensurability.

¹¹ For the classical Confucian context, see Du and Song, Ching, Bloom, and Chan; for the neo-Confucian context, see De Bary 1988.

democratic political system is attributed by these scholars to various contingent political or economic factors that frustrated this otherwise natural, teleological development from early theories of human freedom and dignity to a full-blown modern western liberal theory of the self and society.¹² My own experience has been that locating such incipient liberal theories in early Chinese texts involves doing considerable violence to the actual language or—more commonly—reading isolated passages out of their historical context. This is a view that has been seconded by other scholars of early China,¹³ and it also gives fuel to the postmodern antirealists, who see this project as a fundamentally flawed form of intellectual imperialism. Antirealists point out that the modern liberal conception of the self and its relationship to society is quite different from traditional conceptions, whether ancient Greek or ancient Chinese. As Taylor (1989: 111) has noted, it has become something of a truism in the humanities that “our” conception of the self is a peculiarly modern, western product, and in his discussion of the Chinese conception of physicality, Roger Ames is even led so far as to assert that radically different early Chinese theories about the self signify that “the Chinese are truly a different order of humanity” (1993: 149).

This theory-based approach to comparative religion is not without its own problems. One that immediately comes to mind is the problem of theoretical uniformity in any given culture. Most comparative studies of the “East” and “West” equate the “eastern worldview” with Confucianism and also tend to treat “Confucianism” as a theoretical unit rather than a complex and historically quite diverse phenomenon. They similarly treat modern western liberals as a homogeneous group subscribing to a single, coherent, and consistent theory of the self and society, which is as radical an oversimplification as viewing “East Asians” as some distinct, conceptually homogeneous group. It is difficult to draw clear boundaries around cultural areas, especially in the modern world, and even within geographical areas that have historically been rather culturally and ideologically homogeneous, such as “China,” closer inspection reveals a wild profusion of regional subcultures and sometimes quite incompatible theoretical views of the self and the proper relationship between self and society. Although traditional Chinese culture is often presented as monolithically “Confucian” (with, perhaps, an alternative Daoist refuge for inveterate individuals), the boundaries of what theoretically defines Confucianism have historically been quite fluid (Chow, Ng, and Henderson), and even fairly core Confucian theories, such as rule by means of virtuous example rather than coercion or law, have often been radically at odds with the manner in which

¹² See, e.g., De Bary 1998: 5 and Ching: 72–73.

¹³ The view is seconded, e.g., in Ames 1988, Rosemont 1988, Peerenboom: 252, and Yu.

bureaucratic imperial China was actually administered. In addition, the rate at which modern Chinese people have been exposed to foreign traditions has vastly accelerated in the last century—with Deweyan pragmatism, Marxism, capitalism, and MTV rapidly joining older imports such as Buddhism—and all of these imported theories have clearly impacted the contemporary Chinese worldview.

In addition, as a more general statement about the problems involved with studying religious cultures on the level of theory, we might observe not only that individuals in a culture vary from one another with regard to their belief systems (as we see very clearly with regard to such intractable debates as those about abortion and affirmative action in the United States) but that very few individuals themselves possess entirely internally consistent theories of, for instance, the “self.” As I argue below, individuals often shift from situation to situation—or, sometimes, even within the same utterance—between different and mutually incompatible conceptual models when discussing such topics as the “self” or “morality.” This does not mean, however, that people are fundamentally confused: on the contrary, most people whom I know (both Chinese and western) have fairly stable concepts of themselves and the world they live in, and their values and decision-making processes are usually reasonably coherent and predictable. The possibility that I wish to explore is simply that the theoretical level is not where we should be looking if we, as comparative religionists, wish to understand what makes people tick, because conscious theorizing itself is grounded in more basic cognitive processes. It is precisely this possibility that is the basis of the third methodology and theory for comparative work that I turn to now.

A NEW METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

What I would like to suggest here is a relatively new methodology for cross-cultural comparative work: the study of embodied cognition, as reflected in the phenomena of conceptual metaphor and cognitive blending, which represent the subject matter of the field of cognitive linguistics. This methodology is, in turn, based on a theoretical foundation alternately referred to as “experiential” or “embodied” realism.

Methodology: Conceptual Metaphor Analysis

Cognitive linguistics and conceptual metaphor analysis are perhaps most familiar to the general academic public through the works of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, who see themselves as being engaged

in a kind of “descriptive or empirical phenomenology” aimed at sketching out a “geography of human experience” (Johnson 1987: xxxviii).¹⁴ One of the basic tenets of the cognitive linguistics approach is that human cognition—the production, communication, and processing of meaning—is heavily dependent on mappings between domains, with “mapping” understood as “a correspondence between two sets that assigns to each element in the first a counterpart in the second” (Fauconnier: 1). Another tenet—one that sharply distinguishes this approach from the word fetishism approach described above—is that the process of human cognition is independent of language and that linguistic manifestations of cross-domain mappings are merely surface manifestations of deeper cognitive processes.¹⁵ These mappings take several forms, but perhaps the most dramatic form—and the form we will be primarily concerned with here—is what Gilles Fauconnier refers to as “projection mappings” (9), where part of the structure of a more concrete or clearly organized domain (the *source* domain) is used to understand and talk about another, usually more abstract or less clearly structured domain (the *target* domain). It is this sort of projective mapping that we will be referring to as “metaphor,” which—understood in this way—encompasses simile and analogy as well as metaphor in the more traditional sense.

¹⁴ For a discussion of the link between phenomenology and the work of Lakoff and Johnson, see Wolf: 38–41. For a basic introduction to contemporary metaphor theory, the reader is referred to Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 1999; Lakoff and Turner; Johnson 1987; Sweetser; and Kövecses 1986, 1990. Lakoff 1993 is perhaps the best article-length, general introduction to the cognitive theory of metaphor, and Ortony is a helpful resource that provides a variety of theoretical perspectives on metaphor. For the more general theory of mental spaces, conceptual mapping, and cognitive blending, see Fauconnier, Fauconnier and Sweetser, and Fauconnier and Turner.

¹⁵ For a brief discussion of how this treatment of language as mere “signals” connected to a deeper, nonlinguistic structure differs from structural or generative linguistic approaches, see Fauconnier: 1–5. Scholars studying metaphor from a cognitive perspective cite several types of phenomena as evidence that metaphors in fact represent conceptually active, dynamic, language-independent structures. The expression “living in the fast lane” is an example of “novel-case generalization” evidence: the fact that entirely novel linguistic expressions can be generated that are nonetheless instantly comprehended by a competent speaker because they draw on a shared conceptual structure. Related evidence includes polysemy—the fact that we find systematically related meanings for single words or expressions such as “dead end” or “lost”—and inference patterns—that is, the fact that reasoning patterns from well-structured source domains (physical travel, for instance) are commonly used to draw conclusions about abstract target domains (e.g., life). In addition to such linguistic evidence, a growing body of psychological experiments has demonstrated the cognitive reality of metaphor schemas as manifested in such processes as sensory perception (for an early review of such experiments, see Gibbs and Gibbs and Colston, as well as Boroditsky for more recent experimental evidence), and several studies have provided evidence that cognitive mappings are actually neurologically instantiated in the brain (see Damasio; Sereno), although, as Lakoff and Johnson (1999: 39–44) explain, various neurological models have been proposed to explain precisely *how* bodily patterns become instantiated in conceptual image schemas. All of this convergent evidence suggests that conceptual metaphor not only is a very real phenomenon but also is an inevitable part of embodied human cognition.

Conceptual metaphor theory argues that our primary and most highly structured experience is with the physical realm, and the patterns that we encounter and develop through the interaction of our bodies with the physical environment therefore serve as our most basic source domains. These source domains are then called on to provide structure when our attention turns to the abstract realm. Probably the most crucial claim of conceptual metaphor theory is thus that sensorimotor and image structures—"dynamic analog representations of spatial relations and movements in space" (Gibbs and Colston: 349)—play a primary role in shaping our concepts and modes of reasoning. It is believed that these nonpropositional schema are neurologically instantiated and are constantly "biasing cognitive processes in a covert manner and thus influencing reasoning and decision making" (Damasio: 185).¹⁶ The most basic of these structures are referred to as "primary schemas" that come to be associated with abstract target domains through experiential correlation, resulting in a set of "primary metaphors." Lakoff and Johnson (1999: 50–54) provide a short list of representative primary metaphors (derived from Grady) such as AFFECTION IS WARMTH, IMPORTANT IS BIG, MORE IS UP, and so forth,¹⁷ specifying their sensorimotor source domains and the primary experience correlations that give rise to them. Two examples of primary metaphors that will be referred to again later are as follows:

a) PURPOSES ARE DESTINATIONS

Subjective Judgment: achieving a purpose

Sensorimotor Experience: reaching a destination

Example: "He'll ultimately be successful, but he isn't *there* yet."

Primary Experience: reaching a destination in everyday life and thereby achieving a purpose (e.g., if you want a drink, you need to go to the water cooler).

b) ACTIONS ARE SELF-PROPELLED MOTIONS

Subjective Judgment: action

Sensorimotor Experience: moving one's body through space

Example: "I'm *moving* right along on the project."

Primary Experience: common action of moving oneself through space.
(Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 52–53)

¹⁶ See also Damasio's claim that "images are probably the main content of our thoughts" (107) and Steven Pinker's (284–287) discussion of the importance of mental imagery for human reasoning. Neither Damasio nor Pinker is associated with the cognitive linguistics movement—Pinker is, in fact, a Chomskyan linguist, a group that has tended to have a bitterly adversarial relationship with cognitive linguists—but both Pinker's and Damasio's views serve to support and flesh out the insights of cognitive linguists.

¹⁷ A standard convention in the field of cognitive linguistics is to indicate metaphor schemas by means of small caps and to use *schemas* (rather than the more awkward *schemata*) as the plural.

It is important to note that schemas understood in this way are based on experiential correlation, rather than preexisting similarity, and that they represent analog or image “irreducible gestalt structures” (Johnson 1987: 44)—including entities, properties, and relations—rather than propositions. Thus, the label PURPOSES ARE DESTINATIONS should be seen as a shorthand way to refer to “the complex web of connections in our experience and understanding formed by this mapping across domains of experience” rather than a propositional statement; “the metaphor itself is not reducible to the proposition we use to name it” (Johnson 1987: 7).

Traditional theories of metaphor usually portray it as a relatively rare and somewhat “deviant” mode of communication thrown in to add rhetorical spice but fully reducible to some equivalent literal paraphrase. Metaphor understood in this way is thus viewed as a purely optional linguistic device. An important claim of the cognitive approach to metaphor is that metaphor is, in fact, primarily a matter of *thought*, not language, and that conceptual metaphor is ubiquitous and unavoidable for creatures like us. Conceptual metaphor, it is claimed, serves as one of our primary tools for reasoning about ourselves and the world—especially about relatively abstract or unstructured domains. While abstract concepts such as “time” or “death” may have a skeleton structure that is directly (i.e., nonmetaphorically) represented conceptually, in most cases this structure is not rich or detailed enough to allow us to make useful inferences. Therefore, when we attempt to conceptualize and reason about abstract or relatively unstructured realms, this skeleton structure is fleshed out (usually automatically and unconsciously) with additional structure provided by the primary metaphors derived from basic bodily experience, often invoked in combination with other primary schemas to form complex metaphors or conceptual blends. When primary or complex source domains are activated in such cases and mapped onto the target domain, most aspects of the source domain’s conceptual topology—that is, inference patterns, imagistic reasoning patterns, salient entities, and so on—are preserved, thereby importing a high degree of structure into the target domain.¹⁸ To give an illustration of this process, consider the question of how we are to comprehend and reason about something as abstract as “life.” Lakoff and Johnson (1999: 60–62) note that, when reasoning or talking about life, English speakers often invoke the complex metaphor A PURPOSEFUL LIFE IS A JOURNEY, which provides them with a schema drawn from embodied

¹⁸ I say “most” aspects because the skeletal structure of the target domain that is directly represented in consciousness serves to constrain not only what source domains can be mapped onto it but also which aspects of the source domain can be successfully mapped and which can be ignored as irrelevant (see Lakoff 1990: 67–73, 1993: 228–235).

experience. This schema is based on the two primary metaphors mentioned above—PURPOSES ARE DESTINATIONS and ACTIONS ARE SELF-PROPELLED MOTIONS—that have become a part of our conceptual “toolbox” through experiential correlation. When these two primary metaphors are combined with the simple fact (derived from our common knowledge of the world) that a long trip to a series of destinations constitutes a journey, we have the complex metaphor schema A PURPOSEFUL LIFE IS A JOURNEY, which Lakoff and Johnson map as follows:

Journey	→	Purposeful Life
Traveler	→	Person Living a Life
Destinations	→	Life Goals
Itinerary	→	Life Plan

The PURPOSEFUL LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor arises out of our basic embodied experience and gives us a way to think and reason about this abstract “entity,” which in itself is unstructured and therefore difficult to reason about. As Lakoff and Johnson (1999: 62) note, the full practical import of a metaphor such as this lies in its entailments: that is, the fact that the metaphoric link between abstract life and a concrete journey allows us to draw on our large stock of commonplace knowledge about journeys and apply this knowledge to “life.” So, for instance, we unconsciously assume that life, like a physical journey, requires planning if one is to *reach* one’s *destination*, that difficulties will be *encountered along the way*, that one should avoid being *sidetracked* or *bogged down*, and so forth. Having become convinced that I have become *sidetracked*, for instance, I unconsciously import reasoning structures from the source domain and project them onto the target domain: exerting more effort (*traveling farther*) in my current endeavor (*direction, path*) will only make things worse (*lead me farther astray*); if I wish things to improve (get *back on track*), then it will be necessary first to radically change my current manner of doing things (*backtrack, reverse*) until it resembles the manner in which I used to do things at some particular time in the past (get *back* to the *point* where I went astray) and then begin making effort again (begin *moving forward*) in a very different manner than I am doing now (in a new *direction*). We can thus see how a single complex metaphor can have profound practical implications, influencing decision making and providing us with normative guidance. In addition, the sheer awkwardness of the literal paraphrases just given illustrates how deeply the PURPOSEFUL LIFE IS A JOURNEY schema penetrates our consciousness: it takes a great deal of effort to avoid invoking it in some way when discussing life decisions.

As we can see from this example, a single complex, conceptual metaphor structure can inform a whole series of specific linguistic expressions. These “families” of specific metaphorical expressions are not random or unrelated but, rather, are all motivated by a common conceptual schema. This, indeed, is a crucial proposition of cognitive linguistics: that metaphorical expressions are not simply fixed, linguistic conventions but, rather, represent the surface manifestations of deeper, active, and largely unconscious *conceptual* structures. This means that a metaphoric structure such as A PURPOSEFUL LIFE IS A JOURNEY exists independently of any specific metaphoric expression of it and can thus continuously generate new and unforeseen expressions. Anyone familiar with the PURPOSEFUL LIFE IS A JOURNEY schema can instantly grasp the sense of such metaphors as *dead-end job* or *going nowhere* upon hearing them for the first time and can also draw on the conceptual schema to create related but entirely novel metaphoric expressions. Were I a country singer, for instance, I might write a song entitled “The Airplane of Life Is About to Depart the Gate, and I Don’t Have a Boarding Pass,” which draws on the PURPOSEFUL LIFE IS A JOURNEY image schema but employs it in an entirely novel (albeit somewhat painful) linguistic expression.

This brief overview of conceptual metaphor theory should give some idea of its significance as a methodology for the study of religious thought. We conceptualize such abstract subjects as the world, ourselves, our place in the world, and our normative relationships to others by means of metaphor, which means that if we want to study what people think about religion and how this differs from other ways of thinking, then we should be looking at the level of conceptual metaphor rather than individual words (the word fetishism approach) or philosophical theories (the theory-based approach). The structure of conceptual metaphors is more general than any individual linguistic sign but also more basic than a theory, and cognitive linguists argue that it is at this intermediate level of conceptualization that most of our reasoning patterns are based.¹⁹ In other words, if we want to know what people *really* think about concept X, then we need to look at the actual metaphors they use when discussing the concept rather than third-person, theoretical accounts of the concept (although, of course, such theoretical accounts will almost inevitably invoke metaphor in a revealing way).

¹⁹ In Lakoff and Johnson 1999, for instance, several chapters are devoted to demonstrating how the structure of the philosophical theories of Descartes, Kant, rational choice theorists, and Noam Chomsky, among others, arise out of the basic conceptual metaphors that these thinkers choose as their starting points.

In addition, another important claim of cognitive linguistics is that most of our abstract concepts are structured by multiple, and often literally inconsistent, metaphors. As Lakoff and Johnson have noted, literal consistency is not something that we require of our metaphors, as long as they work together in a coherent fashion. Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 87–105) describe the manner in which mutually inconsistent metaphors for such abstractions as an “argument” (ARGUMENT AS WAR, ARGUMENT AS JOURNEY, ARGUMENT AS CONTAINER) work together to form a coherent metaphorical concept. Basically, because no single metaphorical image is sufficient to generate all of the entailments necessary to conceptualize and deal with the complex phenomenon of an “argument,” different schemas are invoked in various situations to highlight the entailments relevant to that situation. What makes these literally inconsistent schemas cohere conceptually is the fact that, although each has its own set of entailments, these entailments partially overlap and supplement one another.

The significance of this for our discussion of methodology is that if people reason about concept X by picking and choosing from a set of literally inconsistent metaphors depending on the demands of the situation, it is a mistake to look for a single, consistent “theory of X.” Comparisons between cultures performed at the theoretical level will therefore miss the nuances of how people actually reason about and perceive the world. In addition, trying to distill a single, consistent theory from a mixed set of metaphors will obscure the real tensions among the various image schematic models.

The importance of this becomes very clear when we consider an issue such as “human rights.” Many scholars engaged in the debate on human rights bemoan the difficulty of getting clear about what precisely “rights” are, whether or not there are any significant differences between so-called first-generation rights (civil-political) and second- or third-generation rights (social-economic and developmental-collective, respectively),²⁰ and whether the sorts of rights discussed in the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights have anything to do with concepts found in traditional Confucian texts. From the perspective of conceptual metaphor theory the way to answer this question is to look at what sorts of source domains are invoked in discussions of various types of “rights,” for this is where the inference patterns that actually guide people’s reasoning and behavior are to be found. As I discuss below, conceiving of a “right” as a moral IOU is conceptually quite different from thinking of it as an individual right-of-way, and arguably the tension between these two common

²⁰ This is following Sumner Twiss (32), who in turn follows Burns Weston and Karel Vasek in his characterization of the “three generations” of rights.

metaphors for conceptualizing rights in the West has something to do with the conflicts that can arise when certain types of rights (my “right” to a job that will support me and my family) are asserted against other types of rights (an employer’s “right” not to be infringed on in the running of a private business).

Theoretical Foundation: Embodied Realism

Before we go on to consider a very brief case example of how the methodology of conceptual metaphor analysis might be applied to conceptions of rights and morality in China and the West, it is important to note that this methodology is based on a new theoretical orientation, “embodied realism,” that has important implications for cross-cultural comparative work. Conceptual metaphors are understood as “interactive . . . structured modes of understanding” that arise as a result of our embodied mind having to adapt to “our physical, cultural, and interpersonal environments” (Fesmire: 152). Because human bodies are quite similar the world over, and the types of environments human beings face are also shared in most important respects, one would expect to find a high degree of similarity with regard to conceptual metaphors across human cultures and languages, especially with regard to primary metaphor.²¹ For instance, it is not unreasonable to claim that all human beings—regardless of culture, language, or period in history—have had the experience of needing to move from point A to point B in order realize some purpose, and we should thus not be surprised if the primary metaphor PURPOSES ARE DESTINATIONS is universal among human cultures. In other words, because human experience involves a huge number of shared, embodied image structures, we should expect these shared structures—as a result of projective mapping—to be reflected at the level of abstract thought as well.

Of course, because these image patterns arise through the interactions of our embodied minds with our environment, we would also expect that dramatic changes in environment would be reflected in the creation of novel conceptual metaphors. We see this happen constantly with the creation of new technologies. For example, Lakoff and Johnson (1999: 257–260) discuss how the advent of widespread computer use in the 1970s and 1980s gave rise to a new metaphor for the mind in first-generation cognitive

²¹ Indeed, findings in evolutionary psychology suggest that some primary metaphor schemas may have, through evolutionary time, become part of the innate structure of the human brain. For a discussion of the “body-minded brain” and its probable evolutionary origins, see Damasio: 226–230; for evolutionary psychology theories of the development of human cognition, see Pinker; for some discussion of evolutionary pressures on the embodied mind, see Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 17–18, 95; and for the argument that cognitive linguistics needs to pay more attention to the findings of evolutionary psychology, see Carroll.

science, the MIND AS COMPUTER. Nonetheless, despite the great strides in technology that have been made over the centuries and the impact these technologies have had on our lives, the basic shared human environment has remained remarkably stable.²² We still have to move physically in order to get something that we want, we still obtain most of our information about the world through our sense of sight (the experiential basis of the common primary metaphor KNOWING IS SEEING), and the basic overall repertoire of motions and physical interactions possessed by a modern American is not terribly different from that possessed by, say, a Chinese person in the fifth century B.C.E. Despite the advent of electricity, moveable type, computers, and the Internet, then, the basic stability of the human body and the environment with which it is forced to interact across cultures and time would lead us to expect a high degree of universality in basic metaphor schemas.

The combination of embodied realist stance and the methodology of conceptual metaphor analysis allows scholars of comparative religion to avoid some of the problems that have plagued past approaches. Because thought is about cognitive structures rather than specific words or expressions, we avoid the word fetishism conclusion that the absence of a word corresponding to *human rights* in classical Chinese means that traditional China could not have had the concept of rights. At the other end of the methodological spectrum, the claim is that philosophical theories concerning such abstract concepts as “rights” or morality arise out of basic conceptual metaphorical structures built into colloquial language. This means that, despite differences between, say, traditional Confucian and modern western liberal theories of morality or the self, both of these theoretical conceptions grow out of and make use of a deeper metaphysical grammar that has its roots in common human embodied experience. In this respect, the cognitive linguistic approach responds to the concerns raised by scholars of comparative work such as Eliot Deutsch (95–97), who has argued that comparison carried on at either the level of specific terminology or the level of philosophical theory misses the important level in between that represents a “common core” or “deep grammar” of human experience.

The embodied realist stance thus lies somewhere in between antirealism and Enlightenment realism. Against the antirealists, it would argue that there *are* structures of cognition common to all human beings regardless

²² All bets are off, of course, if the world we have to deal with changes radically; we might expect a future generation of children raised in zero-gravity conditions in space (with no inherent up or down, no day or night, etc.) coming up with radically new metaphors, incomprehensible to us, and similarly being unable to understand some of our most basic metaphors.

of their culture, language, or particular history. Against the Enlightenment realists, it would argue that these commonalities are not reflections of some a priori order existing independently of humans and necessarily true for any conceivable rational being but, rather, arise out of the interactions of human bodies with a fairly stable physical world over the course of both evolutionary and personal time, which makes the emergence of certain primary metaphors and other cognitive structures almost inevitable for creatures like us. Cognitive linguistics takes seriously empirical discoveries concerning the manner in which our body-minds function, seeking to formulate an empirically responsible study of human cognition that transcends the traditional mind-body and humanities-natural sciences dichotomy.²³ It thus steers between the Scylla of Enlightenment intellectual imperialism and the Charybdis of the postmodern “prison house of language,” giving us both a powerful and concrete methodology for comparative cultural studies and a coherent theoretical grounding for this methodology.

CASE EXAMPLE: MORAL ACCOUNTING VERSUS MORAL SPACE

To give an idea of how this methodology might be applied to the debate about human rights discussed in the first section of this article, I will here very briefly sketch out some different metaphoric conceptions of morality in the West and China and explain how the discussion of human rights is related to these models. For several reasons, this can really be nothing more than merely a suggestive outline of how the actual comparison should properly be done. To begin with, space considerations do not allow for an extensive examination of primary texts, and so I can only provide here the barest suggestion of how the conceptual metaphor approach can be systematically applied to an entire text or set of texts.²⁴ In addition, for the sake of convenience I will be using Lakoff and Johnson’s characterization of metaphors for morality as the western example and will be drawing my Chinese example from the *Analects*, or collected sayings, of Confucius, a text that dates from the fifth century B.C.E. There are at least two things wrong with this approach. First of all, although it is true that the strong historical cultural continuity in China

²³ See Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 554; cf. Tooby and Cosmides (1992: esp. 19–24) and their call for the humanities and social sciences to get beyond the “Standard Social Science Model” in order to embrace an “Integrated Causal Model.”

²⁴ For a more in-depth demonstration of the utility of applying the cognitive linguistics approach to early Chinese texts, see Slingerland 2003, 2004.

means that the metaphors for morality found in the *Analects* are likely to be helpful in understanding the moral conceptions of modern Chinese, a lot has happened in China since the fifth century B.C.E. What we really should be looking at is how actual, modern-day Chinese people discuss and reason about morality, which would involve a large-scale sampling of popular culture materials from, for instance, mainland China or Taiwan. Similarly, although Lakoff and Johnson's intuitions about how modern Americans think about morality will probably strike most readers as accurate and perceptive, it would be desirable to do a similar large-scale sampling study of modern American English sources to see if their analysis holds up. Plans for both of these projects are in the works, but in the meantime it is hoped that a short dry run will help illustrate how a larger-scale, more rigorous study would work.

Metaphors for Morality in the Modern West

Lakoff and Johnson believe that all human metaphors for morality, not merely those in the modern West, are grounded in concepts of well-being, especially physical well-being.²⁵ We speak of morally *healthy* phenomena as well as of moral *disease* that is capable of spreading if not eradicated; we are concerned about maintaining moral *purity* and *strength* and are constantly on guard against *contamination* and *weakness*; we consider it desirable to be morally *upright*, to take the moral *high* ground, and to function in the *light* of goodness rather than to *fall* into the *darkness* or *depth* of immorality. Across cultures and historical periods, source domains that have to do with basic physical well-being structure conceptions of morality; the differences have to do with which source domains in particular are singled out, as well as how they are elaborated and combined with other domains.

In the modern West a common metaphor is WELL-BEING AS WEALTH ("living a *rich* life," "*profiting* from experience"). When this schema is combined with the so-called OBJECT EVENT-STRUCTURE—a primary metaphor whereby events or states are conceived of as physical objects ("he *gave* me a headache")—states of well-being are conceived of as objects that can be given, taken, exchanged, and traded like concrete commodities. This gives rise to what Lakoff and Johnson refer to as the MORAL ACCOUNTING metaphor, under which moral interactions are conceived of as various types of financial transactions. This MORAL ACCOUNTING metaphor in turn serves as one of our primary metaphors for moral "rights"—RIGHTS AS IOUs—which might be mapped as follows:²⁶

²⁵ See also Damasio (159, 179) and his theory that normative judgments arise from background feelings of physiological wellness.

²⁶ This mapping is modified from Johnson 1993: 42.

MORALITY AS ACCOUNTING (RIGHTS AS IOUs)

Financial Domain		Moral Domain
Wealth	→	Well-being
Payments	→	Actions that increase well-being
Debts	→	Duties
IOUs	→	Rights
Debtor	→	Person with duties
Creditor	→	Person with rights
Inexhaustible credit	→	Inalienable rights
Contract	→	Exchange of rights

Under this mapping “rights” are understood as a kind of “metaphorical social capital that allows you to claim certain debts from others,” and “having a specific right is equivalent to holding an I.O.U. redeemable for various specific forms of human well-being, such as the freedom to vote, equal access to public offices, and equal opportunities for employment” (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 298). Rights conceptualized in this way are also objects that we *possess* and of which we cannot be *deprived*—at least not without fair *compensation*. Much of rights talk in the modern West revolves around this MORAL ACCOUNTING schema.

In contrast, we do not find MORAL ACCOUNTING or RIGHTS AS IOUs metaphors in the *Analects*. The authors of this text certainly had access to these image schemas—even ancient China had a money economy, contracts, debts, and so on—but for whatever reason they did not see fit to invoke this source domain in order to understand morality. The most common metaphors for morality in the *Analects* are based on a conception of well-being as being properly situated in space: it is important that one be *upright* (*zhi*) or *straight* (*zheng*) as opposed to *crooked* (*qu*) or *deviant* (*xie*). A very common expression of this idea is the MORALITY AS BOUNDED SPACE metaphor:

MORALITY AS BOUNDED SPACE

Physical Domain		Moral Domain
Physical boundaries	→	Moral boundaries
Staying within boundaries	→	Moral behavior
Crossing boundaries	→	Immoral behavior
Centered in delineated area	→	Morally correct
Off-centered in or outside of delineated area	→	Morally incorrect

In this model morality is conceived of as a bounded path—the moral Way (*dao*)—and immorality is conceived of in terms of *transgression* (*guo*), *overstepping* (*yu*), or *overflowing* (*yin*) of these *bounds*. Being moral

means being *centered* (*zhong*) in moral space, in contrast to being *off-centered* or *unbalanced* (*pian*).

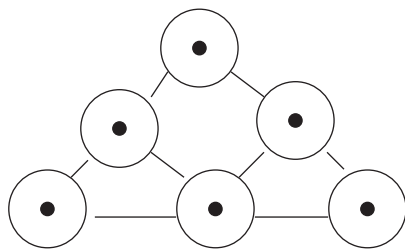
Moral concepts are understood in a very particular way when this MORALITY AS BOUNDED SPACE metaphor is invoked. For instance, consider the issue of law and legal codes as expressed in the *Analects*. One of Confucius's disciples asks him what would be the first thing he would do if given governmental power, and Confucius answers that he would make sure that "names are *straight/correct* [*zheng*]" because "when language accords, punishments and sanctions will *hit the mark* [*zhong*] . . . if punishments and sanctions do not *hit the mark*, the common people will have no place [*suo*] to put their hands and feet" (*Analects* 13.3, emphasis added). In this passage a properly arranged system of names is conceived of as setting up a bounded space within which the common people can act, everyone with his or her own place. We can contrast this with a conception of law as conceived of via the MORAL ACCOUNTING metaphor, whereby it is seen as a set of procedural rules regulating the economic exchanges of autonomous individuals, assuring that no one is *deprived* of his or her rights without adequate *compensation*.

For another example, consider the manner in which "duty" is conceptualized using the MORAL SPACE metaphor. In the *Analects* Confucius advises a ruler that the only way to have a well-governed state is to "let the lord be a [true] lord, the ministers [true] ministers, the fathers [true] fathers, and the sons [true] sons" (12.11). In this conception, duties are conceived of in terms of social roles, and—as other passages in the *Analects* and other texts of the period make clear—most of these roles are conceived of metaphorically as belonging to pairs of vertically structured dyads: one role (such as lord or father) *above* (*shang*), and the other (such as minister or son) *below* (*xia*).²⁷ To do one's duty is to be *zhong*: mentally and emotionally *centered in* one's ritually specified role without *overstepping the bounds*. The image schema for this metaphor looks something like this:



Because a person may be simultaneously a father, son, and minister, each person's proper, individual role space is embedded in a larger, shared, hierarchically structured space, giving us the following schema:

²⁷ One role, that of "friend," is conceived of as horizontal.



We can contrast this conception of duty with duties as structured by the MORAL ACCOUNTING metaphor, whereby, for instance, fathers and sons are conceived of as independent, atomic individuals bearing IOUs (“rights”) and debts (“duties”) that can be asserted against one another. In this accounting model the phenomenon of a child suing a parent makes perfect sense if the child has been deprived of *goods* (proper upbringing, etc.) to which he or she has a “right.” Under the MORAL SPACE model a child suing his or her parent would simply be incomprehensible, although remonstrating with the parents to get them to properly *fill* or be *centered* in their role would not.

MORALITY AS BOUNDED SPACE is not a metaphor unique to the *Analects* or to early Chinese thought, as is illustrated by the fact that most of the MORAL SPACE expressions in classical Chinese can be translated literally into modern English without losing their metaphoric force. Indeed, there is an alternate conception of “rights” that utilizes the domain of physical space: RIGHTS AS RIGHT-OF-WAY. In this metaphor, which is based on the economic domain of private property, rights are conceived of as bounded, physical rights-of-way, along which individuals are allowed to *move* without being *interfered* with and which cannot be *encroached* on or *violated*. There are significant differences between this spatial model and the one outlined above: in the RIGHTS AS RIGHT-OF-WAY model everyone (or at least each different group) has his or her own individual path or space, and these paths and spaces can come into conflict and encroach on one another. In the MORAL SPACE metaphor found in the *Analects* there is only one, shared, hierarchically structured moral path or space—the great “Way”—and one is either on this Way, in one’s proper subspace, or off it entirely.

Despite these important differences, even this brief sketch of metaphors for morality should suggest some promising points of departure for a genuine conversation. To invoke the common metaphor THEORIES AS BUILDINGS, it is apparent that modern American English and classical Chinese, though completely unrelated historically, share quite a few common conceptual building blocks. However, which of these blocks

they choose actually to use in constructing a given building differs significantly, which means that the resulting structures end up looking quite different. In these “common blocks,” though, lies the key to conceptual commensurability and the ability to have a genuine dialogue about issues such as morality and human rights. Even ancient China had economies, debts, creditors, private property, and so forth, and, therefore, even in the traditional culture we can find the conceptual resources to understand modern western moral models.²⁸ Of course, the obverse is also true. It is equally important to see that ancient Chinese conceptions of morality invoke source domains that are quite comprehensible to us (bounded spaces, vertically ranked hierarchy trees), and even the specific mappings should strike us as vaguely familiar. We sometimes think of social roles as physical spaces (*filling* a role), and conceptualizing moral duties in terms of vertically structured hierarchies (*superiors*, *inferiors*) is not at all alien to the West. With the demise of more traditional social structures, however, such schemas have tended to lose their moral force and are now used primarily to structure our understanding of normatively neutral administrative bureaucracies—although the older usages still survive, providing fodder for jokes about annoying “superiors” who are anything but.

The dialogue thus goes in both directions, and it is quite possible that we in the modern West have something to learn from alternative conceptions of morality, which may help us to recover older moral conceptions from our own tradition or serve as correctives to our models.²⁹ Some western scholars of early Confucianism, such as Henry Rosemont, have argued that Confucian morality and conceptions of the self can help to balance the adversarial, perhaps excessively individualistic, model of the self found in modern western liberalism and have suggested that “we should study Confucianism as a genuine alternative to modern western theories of rights, rather than merely as a potentially early version of them” (Rosemont 1998: 64). In a society where soccer moms indignantly defend their “right” to drive pollution-spewing, gas-guzzling SUVs and college undergraduates speak of their inalienable “right” to pirate music off the Internet, exposure to a model of morality that is less myopically individualistic might serve a healthy function.

²⁸ This is similar to Lee Seung-Hwan’s (1992) observation that the fact that China has always had property, promises, contracts, loans, etc. shows that there exists “conceptual counterparts” to western rights talk; and it is also related to Alan Gewirth’s claim that any society, whether or not it has any native term for human rights, has to have a notion of rights in order to conduct exchanges and agreements.

²⁹ The method of conceptual metaphor analysis would thus prove equally helpful to those critics of modern western liberalism who seek to recover older, “communitarian” conceptions of the self and morality from earlier periods of western thought.

CONCLUSION

If the embodied realist claims of cognitive linguistics are correct—if our basic conceptual schemas arise from embodied experience—then this provides an explanation for why we would expect to find a high degree of cross-cultural similarity with regard to deep conceptual structures. People everywhere seem to have come up with broadly similar sets of solutions to the problems of survival presented by their environment,³⁰ and it is amazing to consider what level of detailed similarity can be generated by a seemingly quite sparse set of physical similarities interacting with relatively fixed environments. To give just one example, I recall one day reading a passage in the *Xunzi*, a third-century B.C.E. Chinese Confucian text, describing someone who has lost a sewing needle and has been looking for it all day: “When they find it, it is not because their eyesight has gotten any more sharp, it is simply because they bent down to look more carefully for it.” The passage concludes, “The mind thinking about something is just like this,”³¹ and the point of it (invoking as it does the primary metaphor KNOWING AS SEEING) is that the Confucian Way is understood through hard work and persistence, not because of any kind of natural talent. What actually struck me at the time, however, was my immediate visceral reaction to the source domain—I had, in fact, just spent some time that morning trying to recover a dropped needle to repair a rip in my shirt and had been unsuccessful until I finally got down and did a systematic, sector-by-sector search of the likely region of my apartment on my hands and knees. At first it seemed quite strange to me that some third-century B.C.E. Chinese person had shared such a specific and apparently idiosyncratic experience with me, but on further consideration it seemed much less surprising. Human beings lack fur and thus need to wear artificial outer garments when venturing out of their ancestral environment into temperate climates. In order to be useable, these garments have to have certain properties (flexible, not too heavy, etc.), and the limits imposed by available materials found in nature have caused human beings everywhere independently to hit on an identical response to these demands: pieces of fabric made out of vegetable fibers or animal skins, woven together with some sort of strong, thin thread by means of a needle. Fabrics demand that needles be small so that they do not leave overly large holes in the material, and the limits of human eyesight and dexterity are such that people are likely to drop needles and then have trouble finding them

³⁰ See Brown; Tooby and Cosmides 1990, 1992.

³¹ See Knoblock: 222.

again. Here we see a very complex, highly structured, “thick” cultural phenomenon being generated by a relatively thin set of physical constraints.³²

Conceptual metaphor is another example of a complex, highly structured cultural phenomenon that—despite its complexity—shows a high degree of similarity across cultures and times. It is thus a good example of how embodied realism frees us from the postmodern “prison house of language.” Under the cognitive linguistics model, the basic schemas underlying language and other surface expressions of conceptual structure are motivated by the body and the physical environment in which it is located, which—shared in all general respects by any member of the species *Homo sapiens*, ancient or modern—provides us with a bridge to the experience of “the other.” Conceptual metaphor, then, can serve as a linguistic “sign” of otherwise inaccessible, shared, deep conceptual structure. As Lakoff and Johnson note, “Though we have no access to the inner lives of those in radically different cultures, we do have access to their metaphor systems and the way they reason using those metaphor systems” (1999: 284).

For instance, some scholars of Confucian thought with a strong anti-realist bent have argued that early Chinese conceptions of the self are radically different from anything we, as modern Westerners, are familiar with. Herbert Fingarette, to cite one example, has famously argued that Confucius as portrayed in the *Analects* has no conception of interiority—a basic element of the modern western conception of the self.³³ If we turn to the text of the *Analects*, however, we find Confucius lamenting that he has “yet to meet the man who is able to perceive his own faults and then *take himself to task inwardly*” (5.27, emphasis added)—literally, “inwardly file a complaint/lawsuit against himself” (*neizisong*).³⁴ There are at least three conceptual metaphors involved in this short phrase, all of them extremely revealing about early Chinese “inner life.” First of all, we have what Lakoff and Johnson call the SUBJECT–SELF metaphor,³⁵ whereby we conceive of ourselves as split between a “Subject” (the locus

³² It is similarly revealing that a modern American has no problem solving the riddle posed in another chapter of the *Xunzi* (“Fu on the Needle”; see Knoblock: 200–202) that describes, in elusive verse, the detailed characteristics of a sewing needle. The structures of daily life—which we rarely notice because we assume them unconsciously whenever we read a text from another period or culture—are seen to be remarkably constant when we actually focus our attention on them.

³³ Fingarette does admit that there are metaphors for interiority in texts like the *Analects* but that they are merely ad hoc and not conceptually significant. In fact, as I argue in Slingerland 2004, inner–outer metaphors as tools for conceptualizing the self are just as common, systematic, and important in classical Chinese as in modern English. Fingarette’s view of the radical “otherness” of the early Chinese self is far from dead; for a very recent restatement of his basic position, see Chaibong.

³⁴ Simon Leys sacrifices literal fidelity in order to preserve the metaphorical thrust of this phrase in his translation: “exposing [his faults] in the tribunal of his heart” (23).

³⁵ This was first identified by Andrew Lakoff and Miles Becker and is elaborated in Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 268–270.

of consciousness and subjective experience, always conceived of as a person) and one or more “Selves” with which this Subject has to deal (when the Selves are conceived of as objects or persons) or within which the Subject can dwell (when the Self is conceived of as a physical location). In *Analects* 5.27 the Subject and an instantiation of the Self (Self #1) are both conceptualized metaphorically as persons, and their relationship is cast (ironically enough, in light of the discussion above) in terms of a lawsuit—a social metaphor that brings with it a host of inference patterns and normative values: there is tension or struggle between the Subject and Self #1, Self #1 has done something wrong in the Subject’s eyes, the Subject is appealing to public standards of rightness, etc. Finally, all of this is going on *inside*. This requires us to invoke the CONTAINER SELF schema, whereby another instantiation of the Self (Self #2) is conceived of as a container, the *inside* of which is inaccessible to those *outside* and which can serve as a private forum for the Subject and Self #1 to battle it out in court.

We do not have direct access to the mind of Confucius. We *do*, however, share with him a common experience of interpersonal struggle, lawsuits, and containers, and this common, embodied experience can serve as a bridge to the otherwise inaccessible experience of the “other.”³⁶ At the same time, the recognition that these experiences are contingent on bodies and physical environment, that no set of experientially derived conceptual schemas provides unmediated access to the “things in themselves,” and that some degree of cultural variation in schemas is to be expected allows us to avoid the sort of rigid universalism that characterizes Enlightenment-inspired approaches to the study of thought and culture. We may have escaped the prison house of language, but we are still prisoners of our embodied mind and the physical world in which it evolved and with which it continues to have to deal on a daily basis. The unavoidable facticity of this embodiment means that freeing ourselves from certain really basic conceptual structures is probably not an option. For example, as far as we can tell, human beings throughout recorded history have conceived of time in terms of physical space and causation in terms of physical force, and presumably such primary metaphors are so deeply ingrained that we cannot think without them.³⁷ On the other hand, most of

³⁶ Another nice example of this (which also involves sewing needles!) is a passage in the *Xunzi* where enduring increasingly severe critiques is conceived of metaphorically as being stabbed with increasingly large weapons: a minor criticism is a “needle,” whereas more serious criticism is a “spear-stab.” We can compare this to such English expressions as “sharp” criticism, “cutting sarcasm,” gentle “needling,” etc. Here our common physiological responses to being prodded with pointy objects gives us insight into the common psychological pain of enduring criticism from others.

³⁷ Lakoff and Johnson believe that all of these metaphorical associations are created anew with each individual through experiential correlation, whereas evolutionary psychologists might argue that some of the primary ones have become part of our built-in cognitive machinery.

our higher-level abstract concepts (such as morality, life, the self, etc.) are structured by a variety of complex metaphors, and—at least once we become conscious of them—we seem to have a great deal of latitude in choosing among them, discarding them, recruiting new source domains to create novel metaphors, and combining primary metaphors in previously unforeseen ways (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 537). In his discussion of how neural models for spatial and physical reasoning are “copied” by the brain and used as scaffolding for more abstract concepts, Steven Pinker is careful to emphasize that the “combinatorial” nature of the process makes it quite flexible: “Each part is built out of basic mental models or ways of knowing that are copied, bleached of their original content, connected to other models, and packaged into larger parts without limit. Because human thoughts are combinatorial and recursive, breathtaking expanses of knowledge can be explored with a finite inventory of mental tools” (360).

One way of looking at the purpose of conceptual metaphor theory is with the analogy of Freudian psychoanalysis: as long as we remain unconscious of our metaphors, they will channel our thinking in certain directions whether we like it or not, in the same way that unconscious urges and complexes can dictate our behavior. Once we become conscious of our metaphors or our complexes, however, we gain a measure of power over them, as well as the ability to discuss them with others. Ideally, then, the method of conceptual metaphor analysis can give scholars of comparative religion access to a universally shared conceptual grammar, which can then in turn serve as a tool for genuine cross-cultural dialogue.

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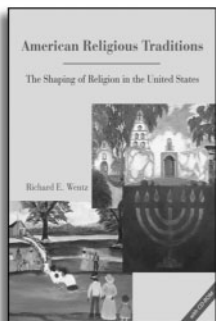
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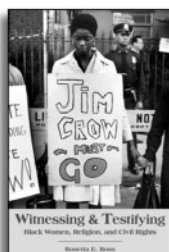
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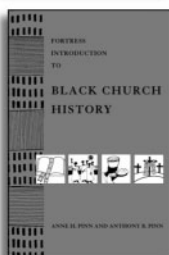
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