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Basic Metaphors and the Emergence of Root Metaphors

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This essay offers some preliminary reflections on the systematic and non-systematic uses of basic metaphors in relation to Pepper's conception of root metaphor. It is suggested that Pepper's conception represents one sort of systematic use; and that the non-systematic use, as exemplified in Chinese thought, has an independent cognitive status and merit particularly in comparative philosophical inquiry.

According to Pepper, a root metaphor theory is a "hypothesis which, if true, shows the connection of these theories [world theories] with common sense, illuminates the nature of these theories, renders them distinguishable from one another, and acts as an instrument of criticism for determining their adequacy" (1948, p. 48). In this theory, it is assumed that there are in existence world theories or world hypotheses which claim to have cognitive adequacy of unlimited scope and precision in accounting for aspects of human experience (Pepper, 1948, pp. 74-78). This assumption appears unproblematic in the light of the history of Western philosophy. The use of this notion of root metaphor is essentially an attempt at a retrospective characterization of established world hypotheses, thus involving a reconstruction of familiar metaphysical systems. The purport in this retrospective characterization lies in its explanatory power. As Pepper states in a later essay, "The question of the metaphor's having philosophical relevance depends on its explanatory function. Does it contribute to an understanding of the philosophy?" (1980, p. 54).

For Pepper, the root-metaphor method for generating world theories has its point of origin in common sense. When a person desires to understand the world, he or she seeks a clue to its comprehension. "He pitches upon some area in terms of common sense fact and tries if he cannot understand other areas in terms of this one. This original area becomes then his basic analogy or root metaphor. He describes as best as he can the characteristics of this area, or, if you will, discriminates its structure. A list of its structural characteristics becomes his basic concepts of explanation and description . . . [or] a set of categories" (1948, p. 91).

Apart from its contribution to illuminating the rise of metaphysical systems, an extension of Pepper's conception of root metaphor, for some philo-

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sophers, offers us also a way of analyzing the analogical use of a set of concepts or "ultimate presuppositions" of theories in various disciplines such as science and religion.[1] Given the importance of the wider application of the conception of root metaphor, particularly in the construction of philosophical theories, the question of the emergence of root metaphor appears to be worthy of exploration. Without committing outright to the explanatory and descriptive uses of root metaphors, one may justly raise a more fundamental question concerning their emergence: whether or not there is a sense of metaphor for which root metaphor presents but one adumbration, which admits of a proper use in articulating philosophically interesting notions that embody non-explanatory insights rather than truth-claims about the world or philosophical systems in general? This formulation of the question assumes that there is a notion of understanding or interpretation that is distinct from explanation. Following von Wright, we may say that "the results of interpretation are answers to the question 'What is this?'" rather than to the question "What is there?" or the facts about the subject-matter of inquiry (1971, p. 134).

In what follows, I offer some reflections on the nature of what I call *basic metaphors*. Evidently these reflections are inspired by Pepper's original idea. For I take as a point of departure in viewing the significant use of a metaphor, in philosophical context, "the use of one part of experience to illuminate another—to help us understand, comprehend, or even intuit, or enter into another" (Pepper, 1980, p. 54). Perhaps a more perspicuous and succinct way of saying the same thing is that "the essence of [significant] metaphor is understanding and experiencing of one kind of thing in terms of another" (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 5). Initially this understanding need not be tied to any theoretical or explanatory purpose. For it may simply be an insight into the nature of experience in the sense that it brings to light a *perspective* for seeing the significance and connection between items of human experience (Cua, 1981, pp. 134-137). An insight in this sense, however, does not consist in an intuition or immediate apprehension of a new truth that informs us on the nature of the items in question. Where a metaphor promises some fundamental insights about human experience, we may call them *basic metaphors*. These basic metaphors may be said to possess the following features.

1. The formulation of a basic metaphor represents a selective decision, i.e., it implicitly contains a choice of certain features of one experience as a basis for understanding another experience.
2. The selective decision involves a judgment and ascription of values.

[1]Black prefers to call the extended sense of root metaphor "archetypes." An archetype is a "systematic repertoire of ideas by means of which a thinker describes by analogical extension some domain to which those ideas do not immediately or literally apply" (1962, p. 241). Another extended sense in terms of presuppositions of science and religion is developed and elaborated by MacCormac (1976, pp. 93-101).

3. The underlying analogy conceived is not an inference but essentially a *projection* of meaning or significance. Thus a basic metaphor may be described as an analogical projection.
4. The basis for analogy must be an ordinary or familiar rather than extraordinary or bizarre experience.
5. Regarding its essential character, a basic metaphor is concerned with pervasive or recurrent rather than incidental or episodic features of human experience, and the philosophical import of basic metaphors lies not in their superficial but in their permeating uses.

In saying that a basic metaphor is an outcome of a selective decision, I mean to suggest that it has both a positive and negative character. This point about metaphors in general has been noted by Black (1962). The metaphor "Man is a wolf," for example, "suppresses some details, emphasizes others—in short, organizes our view of man" (Black, 1962, p. 41; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, chap. 13). Initially, basic metaphors are best construed as *focal notions*, i.e., focal lenses or devices for drawing attention to significant aspects of experience (Cua, 1978, pp. 10-19). What Saw says about aesthetic concepts applies to focal notions. "The point of concepts used in aesthetic discourse is to direct our attention to important features of the work. These features are important in the sense that if they were not noticed, the work would not be appreciated" (Saw, 1971, p. 197). Being a focal notion, the analogy of experiences cannot by itself claim to provide complete understanding. In this sense, an understanding of the significance of an experience in terms of another is always partial and incomplete. It is more akin to aesthetic appreciation than to cognitive comprehension. In confronting the world of things and persons, we frequently attend to certain aspects for the purpose of attribution of values. The selective decision involved in sorting out relevant from irrelevant aspects of our experience reflects our capacity to see things or persons in *a certain light*. This metaphor of light does illuminate the nature of a basic metaphor. But the use of the light metaphor may also lead to a misunderstanding, for taken literally, one may come to think that what is *seen as* real depicts the nature of the object (Wittgenstein, 1969, pp. 197 f.). To see X as Y may mislead one to think that X is in fact Y. If a basic metaphor aims at producing insights, it cannot, without further elucidation and argument, be regarded as an insight into the nature of things. My seeing a painting, for example, as depicting an object of a certain kind does not imply that it is in fact an object of that kind, even if I have grounds to believe that it is so intended by the painter. In so far as a basic metaphor promises insight, it is not generalizable, because it embodies a selective decision. Consequently, in its inception, a basic metaphor is not intended as a description or explanation of the objects of experience.

In employing one experience as a basis for understanding another, the selective decision on what items to be emphasized represents implicitly a judgment of importance. To select certain properties of X for understanding Y

is implicitly to judge that X's properties have a *significance* for understanding Y. At issue is not factual truth but the extension of value judgment. A basic metaphor, in this way, may be said to be an *extension of* significance in understanding analogous experiences. Alternatively put, a basic metaphor is a value ascription based on a value subscription. It is because we regard X as a thing of value that we use X as a basis for ascribing to Y a similar value. (I use the term "value" in the generic sense as contrasted with "non-value" rather than "disvalue.") A basic metaphor, as a value ascription, is always *defeasible.* It is always subject to critical challenge about its legitimacy as a value-claim. Being a focal notion, the value-claim involved is not a truth-claim but a recommendation to see the value of one experience in terms of the value of another experience. Moreover, there is always the possibility that a basic metaphor rests on misunderstanding and misperception. Erroneous empirical data may infect the selective decision. Also a misunderstanding can lead to further misunderstanding. Such a possibility cannot always be averted, for it hardly makes sense to speak of absolute understanding. Understanding is always relative to context and background information or knowledge. However, in spite of this liability, a basic metaphor may still be productive of new ideals and meanings.[2]

In light of the foregoing, the underlying analogy implied in basic metaphors may be made explicitly by calling basic metaphor a form of *analogical projection* in order to avoid the suggestion of its being an argument or an inference. As I have indicated, what is projected is a value attribution that is transferred from one experience to another. Thus a basic metaphor may be viewed as a case of tranference of value in significance. Any such transference may yield a new insight about the experience used as a basis of understanding. In other words, there may be a mutual interaction of the experiences involved in the analogy. If X is used as a projective base for understanding Y, our seeing Y in terms of the significance of X may well lead to a modified understanding of X in terms of Y. I take this to be the main contribution of Black's interaction theory of metaphors (1962, pp. 38-47). Thus if a basic metaphor possesses this power or leads to this result, it may be said to be *bifocal.* There are, however, no a priori criteria for determination here. The point is simply to note the possibility of bi-directional projection of significant experiences.

That familiar experience must be used as a basis of projection seems obvious. But notably the notion of ordinary experience presupposes a shared *form of life* or consensus of what is important. This consensus, often implicit rather than explicit, is a matter of cultural determination. Take Lakoff and Johnson's example: Time is money (1980, p. 9). This is a metaphor hardly intelligible to people from non-industrial cultures. Consensus lies at the heart

[2]Thus unlike the non-philosophical uses of metaphors, the philosophical use of basic metaphors is cognitively responsible to the factual base of the analogy between experiences. Where the base is deemed faulty, basic metaphors are subject to rational criticism.

of effective analogical projection. Here one can get a glimpse of the implicit intent of ethical intuitionism and Reid's recurrent appeal to common sense that is reflected in ordinary use of language; or in a more contemporary setting, Austin's thesis that an analysis of ordinary language can sharpen our use of language as well as our perception of things (Austin, 1970, p. 182). There is nothing sacrosanct about ordinary language. The point rather is to appreciate how much of our thought and action is governed by the normal uses of native tongue, which reflects our experience and understanding within a culture. As I have previously observed, analogical projection is not universalization. Whether or not further extensive projection can be made must depend on our future experience and understanding. Again, we have no *a priori* determination.

It is a truism to say that if our experiences are limited in character, our projection is also limited. But within its limited scope, the experience must be *pervasive* or recurrent rather than incidental or episodic. This feature simply makes clearer the presupposed consensual background we have noted above. Moreover, as Pepper incisively reminds us, the philosophical import of the uses of metaphor must be permeating rather than superficial. In his words, "The superficial uses occur when figures of speech are scattered along the written pages to vivify some other unusual conception, and drop out when the conception is grasped. But when a metaphor is permeating, it may never completely disappear even after it gets ritualized and deadened under an accepted technical vocabulary within a philosophical school" (Pepper, 1980, p. 54). This observation applies to all basic metaphors, for all basic metaphors are essentially oriented toward pervasive or recurrent experiences rather than incidental and episodic ones. As analogical projection, a basic metaphor is, as it were, an *imaginative experiment* in diffusive significance of human experiences. Where we go from understanding of one experience in terms of another, and from there to further experiences is, I believe, always an anticipation of understanding with respect to an undetermined future. Thus an analogical projection in a particular forum of discourse may well acquire a *prospective* significance. It may function as a basis for an experiment in paradigmity, i.e., a groping toward setting up a paradigm for future efforts at understanding human experiences.

If the foregoing remarks are plausible we need to make a distinction between the systematic and non-systematic uses of basic metaphors. Where our aim and scope are relatively restrictive, the projective significance of our basic metaphor would be limited and thus could claim no universal applicability. There is nothing in our conception of basic metaphor that forecloses its use in a non-systematic way. For our attempt at understanding the fundamental aspects of human experience, at least for ordinary reflective individuals, can proceed in a piecemeal rather than in a wholesale fashion.

The proceeding can be deliberate, hesitant, and mindful of the defeasibility

of analogical projection. Although a basic metaphor, by design, is an attempt to understand one human experience in terms of another, its use can be an occasion for learning. The learning process is more like a gradual accumulation of small insights than an unexpected grasp of the root-metaphorical possibility of an idea that admits of development of a categorial scheme. Incidentally, this conception of learning as accumulation of insights is a prominent theme in the works of Hsün Tzu (fl. 298-238 B.C.) (Watson, 1963, sec. 1). Quite justifiably, a philosopher would regard ad hoc uses of basic metaphors with suspicion and disapproval. For ad hoc uses of basic metaphors are prone to create incoherence in thought and discourse. What I mean by the non-systematic uses of basic metaphor pertains not to sporadic and ad hoc uses, but to those that are governed by a unifying and comprehensive vision of man and nature. The best exemplification of such a use that I know of is the Chinese notion of *tao* in Neo-Confucianism. In the case of Wang Yang-ming (1472-1529), *tao* as a unifying perspective for viewing the significance of human experience is often elucidated by a series of quasi-identity expressions such as "*Tao* is *jen* (humanity)," "*Tao* is *li* (reason)" and "*Tao* is *t'ien* (Heaven)" (Cua, 1982, pp. 79-91).

Notably these quasi-identity expressions are syntactically parallel and functionally equivalent to Pepper's root metaphors such as "The world is a machine" (mechanism) and "The world is an organism" (organicism).[3] But unlike these root metaphors, these quasi-identity expressions are not intended as offering any bases for the construction of categorial systems, nor as having any descriptive or explanatory function. These quasi-identity expressions can be construed as basic metaphors,[4] but they present non-systematic rather than systematic uses. They are focal notions drawing attention to ways of amplifying the significance of *tao* as a unifying perspective in dealing with things in the world, and not suggestive of categories of explanation or description. Given *tao* as a unifying perspective of significance, "*Tao* is Heaven" focuses on things in the world as eligible items of human attention, while "*Tao* is reason," on these things as amenable to understanding in terms of their underlying rationales, and "*Tao* is *jen*," to the diffusive quality of our affectionate concern for all existent things. Each of these quasi-identity expressions, of course, may be viewed as having a root-metaphorical promise, thus suggestive of ways in which our experiences may be organized along a set

[3]These formulations are quite in accord with Pepper's *World Hypotheses* and bring out more clearly the metaphorical character of the root metaphors of mechanism and organicism. For contextualism we have "The world is a historical event," and perhaps for formism, "The world is similarity."

[4]In *The Unity of Knowledge and Action*, I followed a different approach in construing *li* (reason) and *t'ien* as amphibious notions that amplify the significance of *tao*, i.e., as focal notions that suggest, so to speak, "evaluative redescriptions" rather than mere "redescriptions" as Tracy (1980) has done with respect to religious root metaphors.

of categories. But in themselves they are intended as ways of spelling out the significance of the unifying perspective of *tao* in dealing with all things in the world. *Tao* is, so to speak, a comprehensive perspective that intercalates different perspectives. Yet these perspectives (e.g., reason, and *jen*) are not explanatory or categorial systems but more like points of orientation in which human beings can secure their bearing in the world. Each depicts a way of understanding aspects of human experience in terms of *tao* as an ethical vision or ideal theme.[5] To borrow a distinction from Ryle, we may say that these quasi-identity expressions embody *crucial ideas*, in suggesting ways in which new questions can be asked rather than *cardinal ideas*, in which systems of interconnected ideas may be developed (1971, pp. 210-211). Of course, a systematic philosopher can transform these crucial ideas into cardinal ideas, thus viewing them as root metaphors for the development of world hypotheses. In other words, each basic metaphor is amenable to a systematic articulation. But its non-systematic use remains a significant projection of insights independently of its categorial promise.

The non-systematic use of a basic metaphor furnishes a value perspective for understanding human experience. It does not purport to describe or redescribe, nor to offer an explanatory account, but suggests a way of viewing meanings and significance. A basic metaphor, in its inception, is like an ideal theme that directs attention to the polymorphous possibility of human understanding and not a theoretical notion to be employed in the description and explanation of things and events in the world. This does not mean that basic metaphors cannot be systematically employed in development of categorial systems, thus acquiring the status of root metaphors in Pepper's sense. The notion of root metaphor, I believe, is an adumbration of the systematic import of basic metaphors seen in terms of comprehensive theory construction. However, basic metaphors may also be deployed for a more limited systematic purpose as suggestive of explanatory hypotheses that render perspicuous the basic character of a certain domain of inquiry such as science or religion (MacCormac, 1976).

But it must be observed that if my characterization of basic metaphors is deemed plausible, when they are used along the systematic route, basic metaphors do not logically dictate independent and exclusive lines of categorial development as Pepper maintains. The line of categorial development of a basic metaphor depends crucially upon the inquirer's theoretical aim, the nature of the discipline and its operative criteria. More important, it depends on the selection of features deployed in analogical projection, which may well vary from one thinker to another as reflecting different judgments of importance. In this light, no systematic use of a basic metaphor logically compels

[5]For the general contrast between ideal theme and ideal norm see Cua (1978, chap. 8). For an application of this distinction to classical Confucianism and Taoism, see Cua (1975, 1980, 1981).

one to develop a single categorial scheme. And, if I am right about the philosophical significance of the non-systematic uses of basic metaphors, a recognition of their presence is a good beginning in the comparative study of world views, especially in comparative Chinese and Western ethical visions that concern the relation between human beings and the natural order.

In closing, let me reiterate my debt to Pepper's notion of root metaphor. Though I have tried to indicate how a root metaphor can emerge against the background of basic metaphors, the very conception of basic metaphor may be seen as a consequence, so to speak, of the regressive movement of root metaphor; thus displaying its germinal form but altogether without any intimation of degeneracy or perversity.

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