

A Study of Body Metaphors in Philosophy

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In view of the tendency of using abstract concepts and speculative methods to study philosophy under the influence of western metaphysics, this paper advocates a method of seeking body metaphors in concepts to study philosophy, including the possibility, specific methods, and significance of employing this method. By examining the reflection on the relationship between metaphysics and metaphor conducted by contemporary western philosophy, we can eradicate the traditional prejudice that abstract concepts should be used for the speculation. By introducing Lakoff's theory of "conceptual metaphor", we can illustrate that the meaning of concept is fundamentally shaped by physical sensory activities from the perspective of "conceptualization", which also means that it is feasible to reflect on the generation of conceptual meanings through body metaphors, by which making sense of philosophy is feasible. On the basis of relevant researches, this paper puts forward three methods to reflect on body experience in the context of philosophy, namely, lived-in experience, etymological backtracking, and structural backtracking. These methods will bring certain advantages to the comparative study of Chinese and western philosophy in aspects of self understanding, comparison between China and the west, and contemporary development.

Keywords: body metaphor, reflect, body experience, philosophy

Introduction

Philosophy is seemingly characterized of abstractness and obscurity. In terms of form, philosophy is mainly reflected in the activities of thinking by resorting to concepts, while the concepts used in western philosophy since ancient Greece, such as "Being", "Form", and so on, are often highly abstract and divorced from practical experience. To speculate on these abstract concepts and the relationship among them naturally casts outside with a sense of confusion. Moreover, for a long time, the employment of highly abstract concepts for speculation has been regarded as the essence of philosophy by western philosophers, and for which numerous efforts have been paid. However, with the trend that modern western philosophy began to make reflection on its own tradition, many important philosophers initiated to rethink the problem that what is originality. In *Darstellung Der Antiken Rhetorik*, Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (2001) stated that truth actually comes from changes produced by metaphor and rhetoric, and that human beings have never properly understood the essence of metaphor. In *Nichts ist ohne Grund*, Heidegger claimed if we perceive mind as a type of listening and seeing, the perceptual listening and seeing will be accepted and transferred to the non-perceptual consciousness, that is, the field of mind. Among many philosophical thoughts, embodied

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philosophy, philosophy of the unity of subjectivism and objectivism of post-subjectivity, sprang up in western philosophy. As a philosophical concept, “embodiment” has a relatively definite connotation, which emphasizes the body dimension of human subjectivity. The exploration of embodiment cognition has appeared in the early 20th century. Merleau Ponty, a French phenomenologist, made a systematic analysis of the body from the perspective of phenomenology. He criticized the views of empiricism and intellectualism prevailing at that time and positioned the body at the core of perceptual experience. James (1950), American psychologist and pragmatist philosopher, mentioned the important role of body activities in cognitive activities in his *Principles of Psychology*. In their masterpiece *Philosophy in the Flesh—The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (1999), Lakoff and Johnson expounded the concept of embodied philosophy and discussed the three basic principles of embodied philosophy, namely, the embodied mind, the cognitive unconsciousness, and the metaphorical thought. They criticized the objectivism which occupied dominantly in western culture and philosophy and presented the substitutions among which was to resort to “experience” which was not parallel to the “feeling” perceived by traditional empiricism, but with the characteristics of phenomenology (permeated with spirit, the characteristics of intention, and the combination of passive and active) and the meaning of existentialism. Professor Chen Shaoming put it more thoroughly that we should pursue the exploration of philosophy directly from the experience of researchers themselves. This paper aims to reflect on the generation of conceptual meaning through body metaphors and ultimately to make better sense of philosophy, which is not only a specific method to trace back from abstract concepts to physical experience, but also a method to reflect philosophy with perceptible discourse; henceforth, the possibility, manipulation, and significance of this method are what we explore to analyze in this paper.

The Choice of Philosophical Language

Mind can only be articulated and circulated by means of language and as a special way of thinking and a special process of ideological activities; philosophy is naturally inseparable from the articulation and circulation of language. The articulation of language plays an extremely profound role in philosophical thinking. Different philosophical forms are due to different cultures, different nationalities, and different ways of language articulation. To respond to how body metaphors can reflect on philosophy, we must first erase the prejudice of using abstract language to make research on philosophy, which is deeply rooted in western culture. Western culture has drawn a boundary between philosophy and literature since ancient Greece. Compared with the philosophical language that always manifests to people abstract concepts, the language in literature is obviously lively and emotional. Language in literature is sensible because of metaphors used in it. However, western philosophy has embraced itself with the supreme intention of surpassing perceptual knowledge to reach rational knowledge, and surpassing perceptual language to reach a strict conceptual language since ancient Greece. The so-called “conceptual language” is the use of concepts characterized of high generality, through which, philosophers believe, we can erase the shackles of sensibility and communicate with the authentic world (conceptual world). Therefore, the confrontation between philosophy and literature signifies the confrontation between abstract conceptual language and perceptible language. Plato is the first to systematically distinguish sharply between philosophy and literature. In *Republic* (1992), Plato regarded metaphor as a rhetorical trick employed by poets and sophists that was unrelated with the great philosophical cause of pursuing “Truth”, and believed that literature and art appeal to our inferior nature, such as perception, imagination, emotion, and so on, hence, was lack of the knowledge about “Eidos” (idea). Ironically, Plato himself is a master to manipulate

metaphors. With philosophy manifested with increasingly abstract and systematic features, philosophers tended to reject metaphors simultaneously. However, with the reflection on modern western philosophy and its own tradition, many important philosophers began to rethink the boundary between philosophy and literature. In the article "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy" (1982), Derrida applied the method of deconstruction to reveal that the metaphor traditionally regarded as a marginal existence actually contained the using of conceptual language which occupied the center in philosophy. Metaphysics itself is a knowledge rooted in metaphor, thus dispelling the confrontation between literature and philosophy. In Derrida's view, the fundamental factors for the confrontation between philosophy and literature in western culture lie in the failure to discover the metaphorical nature of philosophy.

The internal relationship between metaphor and philosophy is first reflected in that metaphor is the best manifestation of the limitedness and limitlessness of absolute ontology. From the physical level, each metaphor is a single and limited symbolic form, while from the meaning level, it contains limitless possibilities. Hegel's impressive use of metaphor about the concept of "Real Infinity" enables us to understand the inevitability that metaphor shows when it is employed to express absolute ontology from a deeper level. He once took $2/7$ in mathematics as an illustration to show an infinite series (i.e., the infinite non-cyclic decimal 0.285714 expanded by $2/7\dots$) and the limited form of expression (that is, the fraction of $2/7$ itself), so as to demonstrate that the real infinity should be the result of sublating the external confrontation between infinity and limitedness. The unity of infinite content and limited form is precisely the relationship between metaphorical symbols and their loaded meaning, that is, the infinite implications are endowed with limited symbols. It is the limitedness of the symbol and the infinity of the implications and the unity of the two that make metaphors endowed with the function of infinite implications achieved with limited words. Secondly, the internal relevance between metaphors and philosophy is also reflected in that metaphor is typically a fuzzy language. The world of meaning that metaphors project corresponds with the world of philosophical objects which is full of instability and limitless possibilities. Metaphors are definite because they have a clear and definite literal meaning; metaphors are uncertain, because their meaning is not floating in its surface structure, but contained in its deep one, and the deep structure of metaphor is just a mysterious treasure waiting to be excavated. It is with the assistance of metaphor that the philosophical text becomes interpreted creatively, because metaphors give it an open structure. Philosophy discusses the authentic existence of the universe and life depending on the authentic language to express. The original human language is a genre of language that can show authentic existence, that is, metaphorical discourse. With the development of human rationality, language is gradually abstracted, formalized, and conceptualized. Under this influence, human beings have forgotten all their authenticity and because ordinary language can only express what is existing in the logic, but not what is hidden behind the logic. In this sense, language obscures the authentic existence of man and the world in which he lives. As Grady (1997) said, western philosophy over the past 2000 years has actually forgotten its root and foundation; therefore, we must make great efforts to revisit this forgotten issue which also represents the root of philosophy. So how to return to the root and obtain its self-evidence? The key is to break through the rules of logic and strive to grasp the authentic origin hidden behind the logic, so as to achieve the intuitive understanding of the essence of existence. Specifically, we should try to grasp what precedes the logic, cognition, consciousness, reflection, self thinking, and subject. Obviously, it is impossible to realize essential intuition by the knowledge at the epistemological level, but by the sense at the ontological level. The most ideal way to make people sensible is the poetic expression of philosophy, that is, the metaphorical expressions.

Metaphorical discourse is not a language form juxtaposed with daily language, poetic language, and scientific language, but a language factor existing in various language forms and it is the root of all languages. Although daily language, poetic language, and scientific language cannot meet the needs of philosophical expression, metaphor, as a language factor, has become a beacon for philosophers to reach the destination of meaning probation when philosophical expression is in dilemma. In fact, both in the east and the west, philosophers prefer to talk about philosophy in a metaphorical way which is used to carry out analogical reasoning to explore philosophy. In *Metaphors We Live by* (1980), Lakoff and Johnson have many propositions about metaphors, such as “The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (p. 5), “The concept is metaphorically structured, the activity is metaphorically structured, and, consequently, the language is metaphorically structured” (p. 5), and “...metaphor is not just a matter of language, that is, of mere words. We shall argue that, on the contrary, human thought processes are largely metaphorical” (p. 6). They analyzed throughout history, without metaphors, it is almost impossible for philosophers to study natural primitives. For most philosophers, the proposition of primitiveness is to select a consistent set of existing metaphors about ontology from the cognitive unconsciousness. In other words, by using unconscious daily metaphors, philosophers make non-contradictory choices for the conceptual entities that are defined by these metaphors and then transform these entities into reality and systematically explain these choices in an attempt to explain the implication of our using natural primitive experience. “To reject metaphor is to stifle philosophy. Without a large number of conceptual metaphors, philosophy cannot develop” (Deigna, 2003, p. 255). If metaphors are removed from philosophy, philosophy will become empty in contents.

In short, due to the confrontation between literature and philosophy, perceptual language, and conceptual language, metaphysics, as the mainstream of western philosophy for more than 2,000 years, always hopes to employ abstract concepts to eliminate all perceptual and concrete entities, so as to attain a highly universal invariant which they firmly believe, will make it easier for people to make sense of the world. In fact, what they pursue is just a rigid fiction. The confrontation between perceptual language and conceptual language makes philosophy lose the support of all perceptible life experience and finally philosophy has become a fantasied edifice.

Conceptual Metaphors and Body Experience

How to establish the relationship between perceptual language and conceptual language? Conceptual metaphor gives us a tangible way to clarify how abstract concepts are based on perceptible body experience through metaphorical mapping.

Husserl (1973) claimed that on one hand, the body, as the original way of existence is the origin of positioning and the coordinate system of positioning. Correspondingly, the body is also the undertaker of all free activities and provides the field for all behavioral possibilities. Our life is subject to our body, and the body sets boundaries for perception, but on the other hand, it is precisely our limited body that provides us with the possibility to erase constraints, so that we are enabled to surpass our body to make sense of the others and the strangeness in the world. In their book *Philosophy in the Flesh—The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought*, Lakoff and Johnson summarized the above ideas into three basic principles: the embodied mind, the cognitive unconsciousness, and the metaphorical thought. They pointed out: “... human concepts are not just reflections of an external reality, but that they are crucially shaped by our bodies and brains, especially by our sensorimotor system” (1999, p. 22). Sensorimotor system plays a special role in shaping some special

concepts, such as spatial-relations concepts, color concepts, basic-level concepts, and so on. At the same time, in the process of concept reasoning, we also need our neural structure to execute, therefore, the structure of our body and brain determines what concepts we have and how we reason them. Lakoff demonstrated the embodiment of cognition through the embodiment of concept, and divided concepts into two categories: One is composed of the concepts that can be directly comprehended, and the other is composed of the concepts that need comprehending through the concepts with direct meanings constructed by metaphors, that is, the concepts that cannot directly understood. They can only be understood through the concepts with direct meanings in some way. Conceptual metaphors create a way to build up indirect comprehension. It is a significant way for conceptualization through which, almost all indirect concepts are formed.

What are conceptual metaphors? They are different from metaphors in figures of speech, while there are both connections and disparities between them. On one hand, conceptual metaphors are based on people's cognitive analysis of rhetorical metaphors. On the other hand, rhetorical metaphors are the presentations existing on the surface, while conceptual metaphors are essentially the internal cognitive process. The relationship between the two is like the one between nature and its outward manifestation. Fundamentally, metaphors can be detected in human basic thinking and behavioral activities, which determines that human conceptual systems are basically attached with the essence of metaphor. As one aspect of conceptual systems, human communication in language is naturally composed of metaphors. When people face those specific and intuitive concepts, it is easy to make sense because of human embodiment while in the face of those abstract and complex concepts, it is not achievable until we employ specific substances to experience and compare to recognize abstractness and meaning hidden behind. In this way, some meanings of specific substances are often transferred to abstract concepts, correspondingly, the mapping process from one cognitive domain to another, from concrete domain to abstract domain. The reason why concrete domain is characterized with concreteness is that it has a certain structure, which can be used for both understanding and reasoning. Both of them are based on our body experience. In this way, abstract concepts are no longer abstract, but also experiential, and reason, as an ability of reasoning, also has a body basis; hence, it is featured with metaphors and embodiment. We use one conceptual domain or empirical domain to make sense of or construct another different conceptual domain or empirical domain. In other words, the mapping of metaphor mainly aims at the correspondence of concepts hidden behind language. For example, "Happy is up", as an orientational metaphor, is used to show that the cognitive concept of "emotional domain" is projected into the cognitive concept of "spatial domain". Mapping is the process of projecting the structure or logic of one conceptual domain into another with the representation of the concrete from the abstract. The study of metaphor should not stop at the interpretation of language structure and we should deeply explore the conceptual structure hidden on the surface. We should not only lament the visual impact brought about by "You come out of deep mountains after hammer blows; Under fire and water tortures you are not in woes", but also realize the cognitive meaning from "Though broken into pieces, you will have no fright; You'll purify the world by washing it e'er white" (Xu, 2018, p. 18). What determines the matching between the source domain and the target domain and the specific details in the mapping? Fundamentally, these are shaped and restricted by our body experience in the world. The mapping of metaphors

is embodied, that is, the structure used to put together our conceptual systems grow out of bodily experience and make sense in terms of it; moreover, the core of our conceptual systems is directly grounded in perception, body movement, and experience of a physical and social character. (Lakoff, 1987, preface, p. xiv)

In the successfully paired metaphors, there is only one similarity between the source domain and the target domain which lies in its structure deriving from the image schema based on human body experience in the concept of source domain. Therefore, the similarity in metaphor is not featured about being external and objective maintained by objectivism, but the similarity created by metaphors. The theory of conceptual metaphor claims that the abstract concept (target domain) is understood through the structure (source domain), which is based on the image schema obtained from the experience of body perception, and this schema is endowed with the original meaning and logic before abstract concepts are formed. This inspires us that no matter how abstract philosophical concepts and systems are, we can understand them through the structure of body perception (specifically sensory perception) and image schema by tracing back to the body experience of its source domain.

Methods Employed and Significance

In fact, the interpretation of philosophy based on analyzing characteristics of sensory experience has been adopted by many scholars. In the west, it is prevailing to mark ancient Greece and modern civilization with “visualism”, and in contrast, there are increasing calls for using “auditory culture” to surpass “visual culture”. In the field of Chinese philosophy, Mr. Du Weiming has pointed out the importance of “listening” in Pre-Qin philosophy since long time ago. In recent years, Professor Gong Huanan directly took “taste” as the characteristic of Chinese philosophy, depicting the basic sketches of the development of Chinese thought by surpassing vision and successively, integrating hearing into taste with the intention to interpret Chinese traditional thought. Henceforth, by absorbing the existing research results and Lakoff’s theory about conceptual metaphors, we can further respond how to reflect on the eastern and western philosophy through body metaphors and probe to know what advantages attach to it.

In the process of practical manipulation, reflecting on philosophy through body metaphors can adopt the following ways: First, we can explore the basic concepts existing in the text, and directly use the lived-in body experience to understand its meaning and the related concepts such as the understanding of the concept of “warmth”. The meaning of “warmth” is acquired on the base of tactile experience, and it

was regarded as virtue in the Book of Songs and the Book of History, even as the base of virtue. Confucius inherited this thought, and gave new meaning to warmth on the foundation of benevolence. Namely, to melt the distance between the others and me in virtue of moral life, to break their own limit with eager moral force, to experience kindheartedness, to transcend the finite life, and to promote the achievement of other lives. (Gong, 2014, p. 47)

Confucian discussed warmth systematically on the foundation of benevolence, and further expanded the content of warmth, communicated it with benevolence, the beginning and the spring, thus highlighted its character of creation, and made it obtain the deep ontological connotation. As a living style, warmth is understood as the image of virtue, the premise, path of cognition, and constitutes the orientation and the method of Confucian thought and destination. In this sense, warmth not only becomes the direct sensible image of Confucian, but also Confucian sign which is different from Laozi and Buddhis.

Secondly, trace back to the original body experience when the concept is formed through the method of etymology. Although some concepts can no longer be experienced directly, the erosion of their perceptual portrait is not that critical, so we can obtain the traces of their original body experience from philology. For example, a series of core concepts in western philosophy such as “theory”, “idea”, “specification”, “illumination”, “enlightenment”, “introduction”, and “phenomenon” are closely related to “vision” and “light”

etymologically. As many scholars have pointed out, western philosophy is deeply rooted in the tradition of visual centralism. It is the sense of vision (with the characteristics of directness and non-intervene, hence the most “objective” sense) that has shaped the basic quality of western philosophy since ancient Greece with its comprehension of the shapes of object (gradually evolving into the comprehension of form and reason), as well as the pursuit of universality and certainty. Finally, trace back to the original occurrence context from the structure of philosophical system or mode of thinking, and ultimately to the body experience that produces this structure. The perceptual portrait of some philosophical concepts has been almost completely erased, but the structure brought by sensory experience has often been embedded in the basic paradigm of thinking. Therefore, we can only restore the body experience when the concept is occurred by excavating the “image schema” deeply rooted in their thinking (which can also be referred to as a reproduction of occurrence context). Rorty just employed this way to criticize the fundamentalism, expressionism, and even logos centrism existing in western philosophy. In his view, the epistemological tradition of “Descartes—Locke—Kant” in the west presupposes that knowledge has its external basis (fundamentalism), which can be grasped by people’s mind (expressionism), and finally presupposes the binary opposition between subject and object, phenomenon and essence, thinking and existence (logos Centrism). These presuppositions can only be completed in the schema of “mirror-metaphor”. If the mind is not regarded as the mirror of nature and the cognition as a representation activity, the exploration of how truth is consistent with reality and what’s the relationship between words and references which are discussed in the tradition of epistemology will be completely meaningless. Therefore, Rorty criticized the “mirror-metaphor” schema which functioned as the thinking paradigm and ultimately, it is a reflection on the visual metaphor of western philosophy. Similarly, in “Panopticon” Foucault criticized the modern western society by reflecting on the fan structure of vision. Professor Gong Huanan takes the basic context of taste activities, that is, the elimination of the distance between objects and subjects, the consecutive breaking of the form, and the integration of the internal and external as the characteristics of Chinese culture, which leads to the comparison with western visual thinking that is characterized of distance.

Reflecting on philosophy in this way has great advantages compared with the practice of abstracting and systematizing the concepts in philosophy.

First, the misinterpretation of the concept in traditional philosophy will be decreased and the connotation of philosophy will be enriched. If the seemingly abstract core concept is not tracked back to its perceptible body experience, there will emerge a conceptual vacuum, which will lead to the habitual interpretation of the concept by traditional western concept, such as the Confucian concept of “benevolence” being traced back to the tactile experience of “warmth”. If “benevolence” is understood as “practical rationality” and “emotion”, the traditional thought is distorted. Through the above methods, Chinese philosophy with rich connotation can be equally incorporated into the thinking of world philosophy, so as to deepen the dimension of world philosophy.

Second, the concepts that cannot be explained by speculative philosophy but play an important role in traditional philosophy will enter the center of philosophical thinking, and show the characteristics of traditional philosophy. Just like some scholars predicted if we analyze the “root metaphors”, “conceptual metaphors” existing in philosophy of different phases from the dimension of philosophical discourse construction, we can create a new history of philosophy. This sentence is applicable to both Chinese and western philosophy.

Third, it is conducive to the equal dialogue between Chinese and western philosophy. Tracing the concepts in Chinese and western philosophy back to body experience makes Chinese and western philosophy completely stand on the same platform, so as to truly realize the dialogue and exchange between China and the west. In this

way, we can not only avoid the condescending of interpreting China from the angle of the west and erase the false proposition of the legitimacy of Chinese philosophy, but also prevent the self arrogance of “Chinese-style westernization”.

Fourth, it will motivate philosophy to participate in the construction of the spirit of the times and integrate the development of philosophy into that of the times. As Professor Zhang Zailin (2018) pointed out that contemporary human philosophy is in a transformation of paradigm, that is, the transformation from modernism to postmodernism, specifically, from metaphysics to anti-metaphysics, from speculative world to lived-in world, and from conscious philosophy to body philosophy. We should fully research on the deep-seated connotation of philosophy and actively participate in the construction of the new paradigm, and only with a sensible way can we mine the resources of philosophy.

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