

Metametaphorical Issues

The Metaphorical Logic of Rape¹

George Lakoff
University of California at Berkeley
and
Mark Johnson
Southern Illinois University

There is a classical theory of metaphor that says that metaphor is merely a matter of naming -- of attaching words to concepts they ordinarily wouldn't go with. The naming theory contrasts with the view that metaphor is conceptual in nature, a means of understanding one domain of experience in terms of the conceptual structure of another domain. The two views contrast most vividly on the issue of whether metaphor enters into reasoning. On the naming view, metaphors cannot enter into reasoning because they have nothing to do with how we think; they are just names. On the conceptual view, metaphor plays a major role in reasoning -- it is one of our principal means for comprehending and reasoning about abstract concepts. In recent years, considerable evidence has been amassed for the conceptual view, based on the role of metaphor in reasoning.²

The present column has several goals: First, to add to the growing body of research on metaphorical reasoning. Second, to try to clarify just what is meant by metaphorical reasoning, and to show how metaphors interact with our folk beliefs. Third, to show that metaphorical reasoning that is based on conventional metaphors is mostly an automatic process, performed unconsciously and without noticeable effort. And fourth, to show that the study of metaphoric reasoning is anything but an irrelevant ivory tower enterprise. Instead, it is at the heart of many social issues of the greatest importance.

The topic we will be discussing is anything but a pleasant one. We will be analyzing a passage taken from Tim Beneke's *Men on Rape*, a remarkable set of interviews with doctors, lawyers, a rapist, prosecuting attorneys, husbands and lovers of rape victims, and men from various other occupations, concerning their views of rape. The speaker is a mild-mannered law clerk in the financial district of San Francisco, who says that, although he would never resort to rape, he can see a rationale for such an act. What is remarkable about the passage is that it seems so *unremarkable*, so matter of fact, so straightforward and coherent, and that it

¹Expanded versions of material discussed here will appear in the authors' forthcoming books: George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal About the Mind*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987; and Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Reason and Imagination*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

Requests for reprints should be sent to George Lakoff, Linguistics Department, University of California, Berkeley, California 94720

²See Gentner, Dedre, and Donald R. Gentner. 1983. Flowing Waters or Teeming Crowds: Mental Models of Electricity, in D. Gentner and A. L. Stevens, eds., *Mental Models*. Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum; and Holland, Dorothy, and Naomi Quinn, eds. 1987. *Cultural Models in Language and Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

reflects in some part the reasoning of many of the people in Beneke's book, even women. Here's the passage:

Let's say I see a woman and she looks really pretty, and really clean and sexy, and she's giving off very feminine, sexy vibes. I think "Wow, I would love to make love to her," but I know she's not really interested. It's a tease. A lot of times a woman knows that she's looking really good and she'll use that and flaunt it, and it makes me feel like she's laughing at me and I feel *degraded*. I also feel dehumanized, because when I'm being teased I just turn off, I cease to be human. Because if I go with my human emotions I'm going to want to put my arms around her and kiss her, and to do that would be unacceptable. I don't like the feeling that I'm supposed to stand there and take it, and not be able to hug her or kiss her; so I just turn off my emotions. It's a feeling of humiliation, because the woman has forced me to turn off my feelings and react in a way that I really don't want to. If I were actually desperate enough to rape somebody, it would be from wanting the person, but also it would be a very spiteful thing, just being able to say, "I have power over you and I can do anything I want with you"; because really I feel that *they* have power over *me* just by their presence. Just the fact that they can come up to me and just melt me and make me feel like a dummy makes me want revenge. They have power over me so I want power over them . . .³

Here is a clear and forceful statement in which a man is giving an account of his reality. On the face of it, there is nothing particularly difficult about this passage. It is fairly straightforward as explanations go. But when we make sense of a passage even as simple as this, there is a lot going on that we are not usually conscious of. What is most important in this passage are the conceptual metaphors and the folk theories of everyday experience that jointly make it cohere.

The logic of the passage is based on a metaphor, SEXUALITY IS A PHYSICAL FORCE, which is reflected in the following expressions in English:

She's *devastating*. He is *strikingly* handsome. She'll *knock you off* your feet. He *bowled me over*. She's *radiant*. I find him so *attractive*. She's a *bomb-shell*. He was *blown away* by her.

In the rape passage, the SEXUALITY IS A PHYSICAL FORCE metaphor can be seen in expressions like:

she's *giving off very feminine, sexy vibes*.

Just the fact that they can come up to me and just *melt me*. . .

The crucial step in the reasoning process involves the following argument:

A WOMAN IS RESPONSIBLE FOR HER PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

PHYSICAL APPEARANCE IS A PHYSICAL FORCE (exerted on other people)

A WOMAN IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE FORCE SHE EXERTS ON MEN

³Tim Beneke, *Men on Rape* (New York: St. Martin's, 1982, pp. 43-44.

This is an inference of the form:

F(A)

A = B

Therefore, F(B).

But the A = B term here is a metaphor: PHYSICAL APPEARANCE IS A PHYSICAL FORCE. In classical logic, metaphors not only don't work in this way -- they don't even exist as such. Classical logic cannot treat metaphor as expressing an irreducibly metaphorical meaning (as is the case here). The best that classical theories could do was to say that metaphors really have the logical form of a similarity statement: A IS LIKE B in having properties X, Y, . . . This view has been shown to be inadequate by Searle, Davidson, and Lakoff and Johnson.⁵ But even if the similarity view were correct, the similarity statement for PHYSICAL APPEARANCE IS A PHYSICAL FORCE would not be of the right form to allow for the right inference. People *do*, however, reason in the above manner all the time. And it is not possible to understand the logic of the passage without reference to such an inference pattern, a pattern generalized to include metaphor in the reasoning process.

This point cannot be stressed strongly enough. It is anything but trivial. The key to understanding the passage is this use of metaphor in the inference pattern just described. It is the crucial logical link that makes this passage coherent and meaningful, something that can make sense to us rather than something that doesn't fit together at all.

A logician might respond that the passage *isn't* rational, and that the reasoning isn't valid at all, but based on a mistake in logic -- a mistake that we have just described. To make this observation would be to miss the point. We are concerned here with how *real human beings* reason, not with some ideal standard of rationality. In order to be able to understand the passage, *we, the readers* must be reasoning that way, too. Most people who read the passage for the first time have no trouble comprehending it as a meaningful whole. Let us proceed with the analysis.

The PHYSICAL APPEARANCE IS A PHYSICAL FORCE metaphor involves understanding *appearance* as a *force* that can produce causal effects in the world. The speaker assumes that

A WOMAN IS RESPONSIBLE FOR HER PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

and, coupling this with,

PHYSICAL APPEARANCE IS A PHYSICAL FORCE

gets

A WOMAN IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE FORCE SHE EXERTS ON MEN.

We see this in his assumption that if she looks sexy ("giving off very feminine, sexy vibes"), she is using her sexy appearance as a force on him (" . . . a woman knows that she's looking very good and she'll use that and flaunt it . . .").

The sexual force the woman exerts is regarded, according to a folk model of sexuality in our culture, as generating certain natural reactions in those affected

⁵John Searle, "Metaphor," in *Expression and Meaning* (Cambridge University Press, 1979) 76-116; Donald Davidson, "What Metaphors Mean," *Critical Inquiry*, V, No. 1 (1978), 31-47; George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (University of Chicago Press, 1980).

by that force. Thus we get the connection:

SEXUAL EMOTIONS ARE THE NATURAL RESPONSE TO BEING ACTED
UPON BY A SEXUAL FORCE

plus

ANYONE USING A FORCE IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE EFFECTS OF THAT
FORCE

leads to

A WOMAN WITH A SEXY APPEARANCE IS RESPONSIBLE FOR AROUSING
A MAN'S SEXUAL EMOTIONS.

As he laments, ". . . they have power over me just by their presence." And where does this sexual arousal lead? The answer is provided by the speaker's acceptance of another folk model in our culture about the relation between sexual emotion and subsequent action or reaction:

SEXUAL EMOTION NATURALLY RESULTS IN SEXUAL ACTIVITY

(" . . . because if I go with my human emotions I'm going to want to put my arms around her and kiss her . . ."). This raises a serious problem for him because he shares our folk *moré*

SEXUAL ACTION AGAINST SOMEONE'S WILL IS IMPERMISSIBLE

(He acknowledges that to act on his desire to kiss her "would be unacceptable.") He concludes from this ethical view that, in the given case

TO ACT MORALLY, HE MUST AVOID SEXUAL ACTIVITY

But we know from the previously noted folk model of sexual excitation and response that the natural result of aroused sexual emotions is some form of sexual activity. Therefore, the clerk concludes quite reasonably that his only moral response must be to repress the offending emotions that might lead to immoral sexual activity, or

AVOIDING IMPERMISSIBLE SEXUAL ACTION REQUIRES INHIBITING SEX-
UAL EMOTIONS.

(As he says, "I don't like the feeling that I'm supposed to stand there and take it, and not be able to hug her or kiss her; so I just turn off my emotions.")

As a consequence, a woman who looks sexy is responsible for the arousal of his sexual emotions (by natural mechanisms) and for thereby putting him in a position where he must inhibit them if he is to act morally. He explains, "It's a feeling of humiliation, because the woman has forced me to turn off my feelings and react in a way that I don't really want to." The humiliation he now feels is part of his sense that he has become less than human ("I feel degraded . . . I also feel dehumanized. . . I cease to be human.") This all makes sense on the earlier assumption that SEXUAL EMOTIONS ARE PART OF HUMAN NATURE so that INHIBITING SEXUAL EMOTIONS MAKES ONE LESS FULLY HUMAN.

It is on the basis of this rationale that the clerk can actually come to contemplate the possibility of rape. As he has already concluded,

A WOMAN WITH A SEXY APPEARANCE MAKES A MAN WHO IS ACTING
MORALLY BECOME LESS THAN HUMAN.

And this is perceived as a definite injury to his full humanity, an unacceptable degradation. The idea that rape might be justified trades on the Biblical eye-for-an-eye folk theory of retributive justice:

ONLY AN INJURY IN LIKE MEASURE AND OF LIKE KIND CAN REDRESS
THE IMBALANCE OF JUSTICE.

Since the alleged injury involved the use of sexual *power*, he sees rape as a possibility for appropriate redress:

If I were actually desperate enough to rape somebody, it would be from wanting the person, but also it would be a very spiteful thing, just being able to say, "I have power over you and I can do anything I want with you"; because really I feel that *they* have power over *me* just by their presence. Just the fact that they can come up to me and just melt me and make me feel like a dummy makes me want revenge. They have power over me so I want power over them.

In giving the overall logic of the passage, we have made explicit only *some* of the implicit metaphors and folk theories necessary to understand it. Little, if any, of this is explicit, and we are not claiming that we have presented anything like a conscious chain of deduction that the speaker has followed. Rather, we have tried to show the logic and structure that unconsciously lies behind the reality the speaker takes for granted.

There is an important, and somewhat frightening, sense in which his reality is ours as well. We may personally find his views despicable, but it is frightening how easy they are to make sense of. The reason that they seem to be so easily understood is that most, if not all, of them are deeply engrained in American culture. All of the metaphors and folk theories we have discussed occur again and again in one form or another throughout Beneke's interviews. Moreover, it seems that these metaphors and folk theories are largely held by women as well as men. As Beneke's interviews indicate, women on juries in rape trials regularly view rape victims who were attractively dressed as "asking for it" or bringing it upon themselves, and therefore deserving of their fate. Such woman jurors are using the kind of reasoning we saw in the passage above.

Of course, not everyone's sense of reality is structured in terms of *all* the above metaphors and folk theories. And even if it were, not everyone would put them together in the way outlined above. Nor does it follow that someone with such a sense of reality would act on it, as the speaker supposedly has not. What the analysis of the passage does seem to show is that American culture contains within it a sufficient stock of fairly common metaphors and folk theories which, when put together in the way outlined above, can actually provide what could be viewed as a 'rationale' for rape. Furthermore, if these metaphors and folk theories were not readily available to us for use in understanding -- that is, if they were not ours in some sense -- the passage would be simply incomprehensible to us.

The realm of metaphor research is anything but a safe haven from reality. Metaphor is not a harmless exercise in naming. It is one of the principal means by which we understand our experience and reason on the basis of that understanding. To the extent that we act on our reasoning, metaphor plays a role in the creation of reality. When that created reality is a grim reality, it becomes all the more important to understanding the mode of reasoning that helped create it.