

Review of *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. Univ. Chicago Press, London, 1980. 241 pp. €7.50 ISBN: 0-226-46800-3.

Reviewed by Mitchell Silver [*Leonardo*, 1980]

Do our thoughts and words, when we think and speak truly, reflect an independent reality, or do we create and shape reality by the ways we think and speak? George Lakoff and Mark Johnson reject both theories, or, as they call them, 'myths'. They believe that the 'objectivist myth' and the 'subjectivist myth' have dominated Western thought for want of an alternative. In *Meraphors We Live By* they offer a third myth, the 'experientialist myth'. The authors argue that it is a considerably better myth than either of the old options. Lakoff and Johnson claim that the inadequacies of objectivism and subjectivism are made apparent by their inability to account for metaphors. This is especially true of objectivism, which they see as providing the basis of most contemporary philosophy of language and linguistics. Current theories of language view metaphor as a peripheral phenomenon of language. Lakoff and Johnson argue that metaphors are not only pervasive in language, but are formative of our conceptual systems, values, actions and, ultimately, the very realities we inhabit. For Lakoff and Johnson 'the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another.' Most of our understanding and experience is of this type. But not all. There are some experiences whose features are clear enough to be directly comprehended, more or less. Concepts which 'emerge' from these clearly delineated experiences are used to conceptualize vaguer experiences. For example, we conceive of LOVE by seeing it as a JOURNEY. As such, a love relationship can come to a crossroads, founder, be on the rocks, be going nowhere, and the lovers may have to go their separate ways. Not only does the metaphor LOVE IS A JOURNEY enable us to conceive of love, it also defines what love is for us and helps determine how we behave towards it. But a single metaphor renders only partial understanding. There are aspects of the love experience not captured by the journey metaphor. Hence, we also have LOVE IS MADNESS -- one can be crazy about one's beloved and rave about him constantly. LOVE IS A PHYSICAL FORCE -- sparks fly, electricity is generated, lovers gravitate toward each other, momentum is lost. LOVE IS WAR, wherein advances are repelled, conquests made, and on whose field one can be besieged and overpowered by suitors. It is through these and other metaphors that we come to understand our experience of love. They structure and orient our concept of love and provide the framework in which we reason about love. Depending upon the particular group of metaphors we use to form it, a concept may or may not be consistent. No doubt our notion of love is not consistent; but that does not rule out its being coherent. Common entailments and other interconnections between metaphors can make a concept coherent without being fully consistent. The systematic metaphors can hang together. Moreover, a new metaphor can discover or create features of a concept not highlighted or formed by the established metaphors. The authors suggest LOVE IS A COLLABORATIVE WORK OF ART could add much to our understanding and experience of love. With this metaphor we would see that love is work; love is creative, frustrating, unique in each instance; love requires cooperation,

compromise, discipline, patience, honesty; love yields aesthetic satisfaction and needs funding. Of course, the metaphor will have different entailments with different concepts of art. To some, LOVE IS ART might mean that it is illusory, meant for display, and exists to be admired and judged by others (p. 143). That we understand love through the concepts of 'journey', 'war', 'magic', 'art', etc. does not imply that they are not themselves metaphorically conceived. Although ultimately our conceptual system is grounded in relatively well-defined physical and cultural experiences, few concepts, if any, will be understood completely apart from metaphorical infusion.

Despite the appeal of many of their views, I do not think that Lakoff and Johnson have provided a genuine alternative to objectivism and subjectivism. Insofar as their 'myth' relies upon experiences that are constrained by reality, it would appear to be, at core, objectivist, though it is unclear just what constraints they believe reality imposes on experience and thereby on the basic emergent concepts. I believe *Metaphors We Live By* only articulates and details a form of subjectivism. The subjectivism they reject is a naive, caricatured doctrine. It seems to me that their theses are wholly compatible with the more sophisticated subjectivisms of W. V. O. Quine and Nelson Goodman. (Oddly, they categorize Quine as an objectivist.) Their failure to find a philosophical tertium quid is, however, a small point. The value of the book is its insight into the crucial role metaphor plays in conceptual systems. Their discussion of this matter cannot be ignored, regardless of how their views are fitted into larger epistemological and metaphysical schemata. Moreover, the steady stream of metaphors and metaphoric systems they present are not only data that demand the attention of all students of language, but are also delightful and revelatory reading. I have a few quibbles. Some key arguments don't appear till rather late in the book; consequently, I often didn't know what to make of the evidence being presented or was left thinking that what the authors were making of it was absurd or obviously false. Also, the density of this slender volume results in some careless depictions of complex positions, e.g. Tarski's account of truth, 'the' socialist concept of labor. Artists have always understood, at least intuitively, that to grasp experience one must transform it into another experience. Lakoff and Johnson may be seen as arguing that this prototypical artistic activity fundamentally characterizes conceptual systems. The book is rich and suggestive of many research projects. It should prove influential if it gets the wide readership it deserves. Its strong claims may not be absolutely true, but they aren't intended to have that mythical status. Instead the book attempts to elaborate a fruitful and fascinating metaphor: REALITY IS A METAPHOR