

Why We Should Think About Metaphor

(June 2003)

'Metaphor is for most people a device of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish' (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980), as poetry is so often regarded as effete and impractical, why as we struggle to come to terms with a difficult economic environment, pressures of work with a strong emphasis on outcomes and the tactical should we spend any of our valuable time thinking about metaphor? The answer, I believe, lies in understanding the very processes of thought. Perhaps I could restate this as critically understanding the way we see and interpret the world. Our ability to 'perform' and be effective, our success in our endeavours, rests substantially on knowledge; understanding how we order knowledge and the strengths and limitations of this gives us the self-reflexive awareness for us to ensure our knowledge processes, or 'tools', are used effectively.

To develop the argument, I think there are three broad themes we need to consider. Firstly that 'metaphor implies a way of thinking and a way of seeing that pervades how we understand our world generally' (Morgan, 1993), if we accept this position then surely it is essential for us to understand the strengths and limitations of this way of thinking. Secondly much of our thought in business is dominated by what we might call the scientific paradigm, a notion of science as providing evidence based objective proofs, that by reducing problems to 'atomic' parts we can deconstruct a set of issues to measurable, fundamental particles. This form of 'truth' is seen to be method based and superior to others. That these claims are based on a fundamental misunderstanding of science becomes almost secondary, we forget that 'the problem with experiments is that they tell you nothing unless they are competently done, but in controversial science no-one can agree on a criterion for competence' (Collins and Pinch, 1993) and also that 'it is invariably the case that scientists disagree not only about results, but also about the quality of each others work'. Thus by thinking about metaphor we can think more deeply about what is the applicability and limits of what we might call the scientific approach. Thirdly by examining the first two points we are beginning to think more profoundly about deploying differing processes and methods to shed light upon problems or issues; to consider the complex relationship between the question asked, method of interpretation and the emergent understanding or product. Of course this approach leads to its own developments of metaphor as for instance in the paper by Ryan (2002), which explores 'dramatic metaphors, with their implicit dialogism' (rather than story telling or simple narrative) when thinking about human/computer interaction. In turn this may lead us to a more realistic expectation of the possible outcomes and 'truths' of any given position. These three arguments might be restated as follows:

1. Most thought employs metaphors not just in describing reality, but also to define what to look for in the first place. If we think of a community as a 'market' we will look for and discover aspects of change relationships; if we think of it as a kinship system we will look and discover aspects of bonding.
2. Science, which appears to speak directly about reality, consists of theories and descriptions that are uncertain and tentative at best - sometimes pure fiction or 'leaps in the dark'

3. So the way we choose to look at and talk about reality is indeed a matter of choice. Dramatic and challenging metaphors, consciously chosen, can help us to see more.

If as Lakoff and Johnson argue 'human thought process are largely metaphorical' it surely is important for us to understand the strengths and limitations of metaphor rather than as they also argue to act 'more or less automatically along certain lines'. As Morgan (1993) so clearly states metaphor allows us to connect or see similarities by attempting 'to understand one element of experience in terms of another. Thus metaphor proceeds through implicit or explicit assertions that A is (or is like B) B. When we say, "the man is a lion", we use the image of a lion to draw attention to the lionlike aspects of the man. The metaphor frames our understanding of the man in a distinctive yet partial way'. A rich and possibly rewarding way in which to think of complex situations or issues. Yet Morgan very deliberately employs the word 'partial', for metaphors do not produce a 'rounded' set of insights, rather they are one-sided. By emphasising certain characteristics or interpretations metaphor very actively reduces others to a peripheral position. By explanation we should return to Morgan's "the man is a lion", 'in drawing attention to the lionlike bravery, strength, or ferocity of the man, the metaphor glosses over the fact that the same person may well be a pig, a devil, a saint, a bore, or a recluse'. Additionally we could add that metaphorical meanings are not always culturally and historically consistent, so require a degree of complicity or common understanding from their intended recipients without this any given metaphor may have the status of a foreign language and so lose its interpretive power. However the central issue of this first theme is that it is only through critical reflection that we are able to clearly recognise the strengths and limitations of metaphor and so truly and knowingly unleash its knowledge ordering and meaning giving power.

My second theme is the continuing desire to obtain knowledge based on a paradigm that represents a common misunderstanding of the epistemological status of the natural sciences. This has led to what Charles Lindblom and Michael Foucault have called society's "truth politics", in which the status of scientific knowledge is often privileged over that derived from the social sciences. The 'shadow' of this position hangs over much research and analysis performed in many commercial organisations. The desire for seemingly objective or 'certain' positions in an environment of economic change, fragmentation and rapidly changing consumer behaviours is understandable. However this often leads to deconstructions of problems that themselves become wholly abstract from the issue under examination. Such abstractions, far from producing the underlying 'theory' of a science, supposedly reproducible and predictive, can easily become meaningless and only of interest as some form of intellectual game. Indeed one can argue that even if 'social science has not been able to contribute with Kuhnian (see Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 1972) normal science and predictive theory to scientific development, so natural science has had little to offer to the reflexive analysis of goals, values, and interests that is a precondition for an enlightened development in any society' (Flyvbjerg, 2001). It is precisely problems of this nature that most organisations are wrestling with. To take a simple example, the amount of money spent on customer segmentation is spiralling out of control yet despite ever more sophisticated and one might say 'scientific' methodologies there is very little evidence that there has been any significant improvement in service targeting or indeed the quality of customer

services. Indeed there is little evidence that such methods have performed any stronger than more holistic, assumptive and some would argue experiential common sense methods. However the central point is not to privilege one mode of thinking over another, rather it is to be critically aware of the issues to be examined and through knowledge of the processes of ordering knowledge to be able to be more conscious of the reasons for the selection of any particular mode or methodology.

My final point is simple and derives directly from the first two points. Managing at times of changes, fragmentation and turbulence requires many forensic skills and tools it also requires alertness to new connections and self-awareness. Those individuals or teams that have such awareness are likely to be more adaptable and nimble than those that blindly follow set modes of operating and thinking. For this reason there is a need for us all to be critical about the way we think and represent the world, thinking about metaphor is a 'way in' to exploring the way in which we think about and order the world, a way of challenging ourselves to be more self aware and ultimately more effective.

References

- Collins H** and **Pinch T.** (1993), *The Golem- What Everyone Should Know About Science*, Cambridge University Press.
- Flyvbjerg B.** (2001), *Making Social Science Matter*, Cambridge University Press
- Lakoff G** and **Johnson M.** (1980), *Metaphors We Live By*, University of Chicago Press
- Monin N** and **Monin D J.** (1997), Rhetoric and Action: when a literary drama tells the organisations story, *Journal of Organisational Change Management*, 10 (1) 47-60
- Morgan G.** (1993) *Images of Organisation*, Sage, London
- Ryan M.** (2002) Beyond Myth and Metaphor: Narrative in Digital Media, *Poetics Today*, 23:4, (Winter 2002)