

Desiring agency: limiting metaphors and enabling constraints in Dawkins and Deleuze/Guattari.

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Abstract

Richard Dawkins's *The Selfish Gene* and Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* share a common interest in de-throning consciousness as the seat of identity. At the same time, they seek to displace agency into non-conscious actors or dispel it altogether. In this sense they are part of a larger movement within cognitive science and evolutionary biology to define cognition in terms that partially deconstruct the distinction between organisms and environment. Yet their projects differ from this larger movement in that they both rely on performative language to enact dissolutions or displacements that could not take place in empirical reality. To evaluate their projects, this essay develops a theoretical framework that envisions

metaphorical language working together with enabling constraints to produce reliable knowledge. Within this framework, the problematic move that Dawkins and Deleuze/Guattari make is the extensive use of metaphoric language without the counterbalance of constraints. Instead of the non-human unconstrained agency that these theorists enact through their performative language, this essay proposes a model of distributed agency that works through rather than against constraints.

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Recent work in the cultural studies of science has shown the importance of metaphoric networks for scientific inquiry. Sometimes these networks have functioned to lead scientists in the wrong direction. For example, metaphoric equations developed in nineteenth-century physiology mapped Africans, women, and animals onto one another to the detriment of all three categories, as Nancy Leys Stepan has shown. But more often, metaphors have opened up fruitful lines of inquiry, as when Norbert Wiener saw metaphoric correspondences between prosthetic devices and cybernetic machines ("Sound Communication"). It is not easy to determine where the limits of metaphor should be drawn. In some sense almost all language can be considered metaphoric, as Michael Arbib and Mary Hesse argue in discussing metaphoric resonance in measurement. Indeed, even mathematics can be considered metaphorical, as Norbert Wiener pointed out when he observed that mathematics was "the most colossal metaphor imaginable" (*Human Use*, 95). So can sense perception, as Walter Freeman and Gregory Bateson among others have argued, for perceptual experiences are metaphors for reality rather than representations of reality. In *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson give this idea a linguistic turn when they argue that metaphor connects abstract thought with embodied experience, providing a grounding we often fail to see precisely because it is so pervasive and fundamental. These diverse explorations make clear that metaphor is not opposed to scientific work but intrinsic to it. Metaphor performs essential functions in orienting and guiding thought; it connects abstraction and embodiment; it allows us to discover regularities between what we perceive and what exists outside of ourselves; and it entwines cultural presuppositions with scientific frameworks. These complex functions can be summed up by saying that metaphor works to connect and contextualize, broadening the space of abstract thought by embedding it in physical, sensory, linguistic and cultural contexts.



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