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Good stories: using metaphors to teach philosophy

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Abstract

Courses that introduce students to philosophy, especially to freshmen, can be a challenge to teach. One of the problems is that while philosophical ideas are often quite abstract, beginning students are often concrete thinkers. One way to overcome this obstacle without making the course less challenging, is to introduce abstract ideas—such as those found in metaphysics, epistemology and philosophy of mind—through the use of metaphors and other literary devices that compare each abstract philosophical concept to something more concrete. For example, reality is discussed as air, fire, shadows; knowledge as dreams, blank slates, and information processing; minds as chariots, bundles and computers; God as an artist, a perfect human and belief as a wager; and the meaning of life as a rock, a middle path and a leap of faith. There was a total of thirty various philosophical metaphors used in this course. After the metaphorical description of the concept, and only after this, does the instructor offer a more literal explanation of the text. With their knowledge of the concrete story as a foundation, students seem to grasp more readily the underlying abstract concept when it is described literally. Assessment of this approach was through instructor observation, student self-reports and the creation of their own metaphors. Overall it appears that the use of metaphorical thinking first promoted better learning in this beginning philosophy course.

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1.1 Introduction

Many philosophy professors find that teaching freshman philosophy courses presents a considerable challenge. For one thing, students often have little exposure to philosophical ideas before entering college. This may be less true in Europe, but is all too often quite true in the States. So philosophy seems to most beginning students to be quite unlike the courses they focused on in high school, such as history, literature or science. Unlike these fields, the philosophical search for truth is less a search for facts, and more a search for the interpretation or meaning of facts. If scientists could build a robot that was functionally identical to a human person, for example, would this mean that it was also a person, that it had rights, that it would be wrong to destroy it? To take another example, if we are conscious of the world only after a great deal of neurological processing of sensory input, does this mean that the world we experience is simply the way that world appears to us? That the “real” world is not the world of our daily experience, that it may be quite unlike what we think it is?

While most students find such questions interesting, even fascinating, many of them struggle with the process of trying to solve them. This is not only because they have little background in philosophy. Rather, it has more to do with the type of questions that philosophers raise. The heart of it is that philosophical problems are quite abstract. Questions such as: What is real? How much can I know about the world? What kind of a being am I? Am I the same person now that I was a year ago? What should I strive for in life? These and others are not exactly the sorts of questions that arise in everyday life. While a few students arrive at college able to think abstractly, and do very well very well in beginning philosophy courses, most do not. Their abstract thinking skills are often sorely underdeveloped. They may be able to understand, remember, organize and discuss facts quite easily— they are good concrete thinkers—but they are not used to thinking abstractly. It is my belief that this is the main reason why they struggle with complex philosophical ideas. It is not because the material is new to them or because they are not bright enough or because they have been poorly prepared for higher education. It is rather because they have not yet developed their abstract thinking skills.

As a reaction to this, many professors teach courses that place more importance on facts, especially courses in applied ethics. This is fine and often quite helpful in developing students’ reasoning skills. Debating such issues as capital punishment, abortion, euthanasia, world hunger, and the like is extremely important. However, since many students take only one philosophy course, I think that they miss out on an essential part of a liberal arts education if they are not exposed to basic philosophical issues. So the question becomes how best to teach beginning philosophy students, the majority of whom are concrete thinkers, to understand basic philosophical ideas, the majority of which are quite abstract.

One answer, the one developed in this paper, is to make abstract ideas more concrete. One way to make them more concrete is to discuss them through stories that use models, metaphors, analogies, similes and other such forms of speech. For convenience, I will simple classify all of these literary devices under the general umbrella of “metaphors”. Through their use, abstract ideas are made more intelligible by comparing them to what is more familiar to the student. In the course that I designed about thirty of these stories are introduced, stories that may be found throughout the history of philosophy and into current times, some timeworn and some new. Their purpose is to compare the unfamiliar with the familiar, so that students have initial access to difficult philosophical notions. Once they get the general idea, once they get some sense of the problem, a more refined analysis can be introduced, one based more on literal and not metaphorical understanding.

The readings for this course are primary source materials, selections from the writings of well-known philosophers. Each selection introduces a metaphorical account of a philosophical idea. After class discussion, students are given readings that analyse the problem in a more literal way. Most of these readings come from one of my books, *Thinking Critically About Philosophical Problems, Wadsworth, 2001*. While the idea of using
metaphors to discuss philosophical ideas is not new, an entire course based on so many of them is new. The goal is to examine the belief that most students will better understand philosophy if it is introduced as a collection of “good stories”.

1.2 Course Design

The course was divided into the following six areas, which represent standard philosophical problems that might be discussed in an introduction to philosophy course. The metaphors used in each area are listed and will be selectively discussed in this paper.

Reality:

Presocratics: Reality is water or fire or air
Plato’s Cave: Everyday reality is like shadows on the wall of a cave
Descartes’ Dream: Reality could be a dream
The Matrix: Everyday reality is a virtual reality
The Phone Call: Experience of the world is like a phone call

Knowledge:

Socrates’ Midwives: True knowledge is like remembering
Plato’s Divided Line: Knowledge is like a divided line
Descartes’ Evil Genius: Our beliefs may be like universal deception
Locke’s White Paper: Knowing is writing on a blank tablet
Kant and Copernicus: Knowing is constructing

Mind:

Plato’s Chariot: The mind is like a chariot
Descartes “Cogito”: The mind is not like the body
Minds and Computers: The mind is like a computer’s software
Searle’s Chinese Room: Understanding is not like computing
Chalmers’ Zombies: The mind is not like a machine

God:

Feuerbach: God is like a perfect human
Paley: God is an architect
Stoics: God is the mind of nature
Newton: God is like a watchmaker
Campbell: God is our higher self

Ethics:

Plato’s Ring: True morality is like an invisible person
Aristotle’s Golden Mean: Being moral is choosing the mean
Bentham and Hedones: Being moral is measuring pleasure
Hardin and Lifeboats: Morality is like a lifeboat
Thomson’s Violinist: Abortion is like a violinist
The Meaning of Life:

Hindus and The Wheel: The meaning of life is like escaping from a wheel
Taoism and Water: The meaning of life is like the flow of water
Kierkegaard and Abraham: The meaning of life is like the choice of Abraham
Nietzsche and the Overman: The meaning of life is like the death of God
Camus and Sisyphus: The meaning of life is rolling a rock

1.3 Metaphorical and Literal Approaches

It may be helpful to examine a few metaphors and compare the use of them to introduce a philosophical concept with a more literal approach. Let’s begin with what I call the “Phone Call” metaphor. The literal issue concerns the nature and knowledge of reality. Ever since Thales got the philosophical ball rolling, philosophers have claimed that there was a distinction between appearances and reality. The way the world is experienced by me through my senses may not be the way it really is in itself. During the Modern period of philosophy this distinction was often argued for in the following way. What I experience through my senses is not reality itself, but my perception of reality. Today this argument is more forcefully made when cognitive scientists point out that we are not conscious of what we see, hear, taste, etc., until the brain goes through lots of processing; until reality has become part of our consciousness. If this is the case, then we cannot claim to know reality directly, but rather have to make inferences about its nature as the cause of our experience.

Not all philosophers share this perspective, however. Some, often called “Direct Realists”, have claimed that we do know reality directly through sensation. How can this be if all we get from the world in vision for example, are light waves that stimulate rods and cones on our retina, whose patterns are then encoded in our optic nerve and transmitted to the brain for considerably more processing - all of this before we become conscious of what we see. How do we know that we encode and conserve the very nature of reality through all of these changes in our central and peripheral nervous systems? It certainly seems that other species with different sensory equipment perceive the world differently than we do. What makes us believe that we alone experience reality as it is?

There are many sophisticated linguistic arguments that support this view, but they are beyond the ability of beginning students to understand without a great deal of background. So the literal defense of direct realism would be difficult. Instead, the phone call metaphor helps students at least to realize how direct realism might be the correct view by comparing what happens in a phone call to what happens in sensation. After all, grandma’s voice on the other end of my landline goes through all sorts of transformations as well, from movements in her larynx, to air waves, to vibrations in a speaker, to fiber optic encoding of her voice, to speakers on the other end and air waves, and so on. Yet the same voice that began this causal process pops out at the other end of the line, a voice conserved through all these changes. In the same way, it is argued, I am not aware of my sensations, but rather I am aware of the world through my sensations.

Another helpful metaphor comes from Camus’ discussion of “The Myth of Sisyphus”. A literal approach to the question of the meaning of life might identify several types of answers under the headings of Theism, Naturalism and Humanism. Students often find such discussions emotionally sterile and fall back on their own pet beliefs without much reflection. In attempting to explain the meaning of life as it would be for Sisyphus, however, they feel the reality of rolling that rock up the hill eternally. Sisyphus was a mythical character whose punishment by the gods was to roll a huge boulder up the mountain, only to see it then roll back down. This he repeated for the rest of his life. Like Sisyphus, students can see there lives as rolling their rock every day for no ultimate purpose (get up, go to work, watch television, have kids who do the same, and so on),
or see that there is a purpose (keep the rocks on the mountain to build a cathedral), and finally to see that the meaning of life is what they make of it through their choices. In this way the question becomes meaningful to them. In fact, as part of their final exam they constructed their own metaphor about the meaning of life. We will see how they did in the next section.

1.4 Student Metaphors

Assessing student learning is always tricky business, but especially so in this course. How are we to tell if students learn better by having complex, abstract ideas first introduced metaphorically and only later in a literal manner; or whether the literal explanation alone would serve better. It would be helpful is there was a control group to teach literally, for example while another comparable group gets to use metaphorical thinking first; but there is no such group. So we are left with just my observations of how well they learn complex philosophical ideas, as well as their self-reports about how much metaphors helped them to understand. These two items will be discussed in the next section. In the meantime, there is a third element that might offer some insight into this approach to teaching philosophy, the construction of their own metaphors. This last item concerns especially an assignment in which they were to construct a metaphor which might help someone else understand an idea. They were to think creatively, as a philosopher might, and invent a metaphor about what life meant to them. We had already discussed the issue in class, so they were familiar with the myth of Sisyphus and were to use that metaphor as their guide--something to agree with or deviate from. Here are some examples of what they had to say.

One student rejected both Theism and Naturalism and found Camus to have a “terribly pessimistic outlook.” Instead, she invites us to think of the meaning of life as a “wave”. Life should be thought of “as a series of motions or a cycle of meaning-making. Creation of individualized values, goals, or purposes gives one motivation, and a desire to continue to create meaning. This constant cycle of creation and achievement is a perpetual motion that keeps meaning suspended: while we do not serve to chase a meaning outside of ourselves, it is up to the individual to create the reason for living. It is a cycle of perpetual motion that not only requires but at the same time produces happiness, motivation, purpose and meaning.”

In another metaphor a student says that life is like being a pioneer. Sounding a bit like Nietzsche, he says, “To live a meaningful life you must not be afraid to live against the norms of society, you must carve your own path and decide for yourself what is right, and you must choose to live despite the inevitable fate that all humans must face—death. In a sense, you must be like the pioneer. You must venture out on your own and travel through uncharted land, creating a new path as you go. ... He is the master of his own life.” Another student compares life to dining, especially the balance that ought to be part of the food served and the value placed on each course—some much more important than others.

Other examples include comparing life to a journey on the ocean, sometimes rough and menacing, sometimes serene and beautiful, with the rough parts just as essential to happiness as the calm ones. Another thinks of life as a box of assorted chocolates, with the freedom to choose which ones to eat. Still another thinks of life as the stages of a flower, each one to be accepted as it is, with a legacy of seeds to be left for the growth of the next flower. Then there was the infinity symbol view of life, where we might “cross and curve across each line, but always stay on the same path.” One student used the metaphor of a fully grown tree that provides benefits to others to express the meaning of her life, while another sees life as like fireworks. “Just like how the fireworks bring colors to a dark sky, bringing happiness to other people and caring for those who are significant in their life will bring happiness to them and a larger, more ‘colorful’ world around them will be visible.”

Perhaps the most thoughtful metaphor was created by a student who sides with Camus about the absurdity of life. For the “absurd” man there is no meaning to life. He is like an infant who crawls out of his
house and gets lost in his own very large backyard. “Because of his struggle to comprehend the immeasurable and immense terrain that surrounds him—all of its sights, its sounds and the things he cannot yet even begin to conceptualize—the infant begins to cry in frustration due to his own inability to understand….He has a feeling of otherness—of separation and of disconnection.” However, while finding no objective meaning to life the absurd man does accept this fate of his and goes on to live according to his own purposes and goals, infusing his own subjective meaning into his life by the choices he makes.

1.5 Student Comments

Clearly, in this creative thinking assignment some students were more creative than others, but all seemed to get the general idea that metaphors could be helpful cognitive tools. In fact, metaphorical thinking plays an essential role in many fields, especially the further away from observable facts the subject matter roams. Think of all the various models used in physics, for example, to help us understand things such as electrons, curved space and the speed of light. In a similar manner, think of psychological explanations of the soul or mind, that use metaphors comparing minds to such things as the state (Plato), warring parties (Freud) or computers. Even in our daily lives we use metaphors to describe abstract notions such as time (it is fleeting) and space (it is like a box). Some believe that almost all thinking is metaphorical, since everything we think about we categorize as like something else. As interesting as these broader questions are about the role of metaphorical thinking, the focus here is on the narrower issue of using metaphors to understand central philosophical ideas. The question is whether or not it is a better learning experience to introduce philosophical ideas first through the use of metaphors and only later to discuss them in a literal sense, or whether it is best to skip the metaphorical understanding and go right to the literal analysis. Mindful that students often say what they think the professor wants to hear, this is what a representative sample had to say when asked directly about this style of learning.

1. I feel having a metaphor is a great way to introduce a theory, it puts what you are about to examine into perspective.
2. Metaphors simplify the terminology that philosophers use and refer back to, so that the big idea does not get lost in the complicated nature of philosophical theories. Using metaphors adds intellectual and emotional thoughts to alter the reader’s mindset.
3. Metaphors also help when it comes to visual learners versus people who can listen to something and understand it. Some people understand things better in visual ways rather than just listening or reading. This is when metaphors come in handy. The purpose of a metaphor is to paint a picture in someone’s head so that they can better understand what is being said.
4. Within philosophy metaphors allow abstract ideas to be more concrete and readily accessible. After interpreting a metaphor one can understand a more accurate, direct interpretation of a philosophical view.
5. I think that if the writers were to just cut to the chase and give the reader the literal explanation of the meaning and purpose of life, or whatever concept is being discussed, it would not be very beneficial to anyone. I believe it would limit everyone’s thinking and people would not be as willing to expand on the concepts that are being talked about or create ideas of their own.
6. Philosophy is a very unique area of study and is often next to impossible to grasp in regards to direct interpretation of difficult texts. Because of this I feel that metaphors are an incredibly important tool to explain the controversial and abstract ideas covered and explored through philosophy. I would classify metaphors in philosophy to not only be recommended but also required when new material is introduced.
7. Metaphors might let the audience remember the philosophical idea more because it was told in a story. Stories can affect people in an emotional way and so they would remember the idea a lot more. People seem to remember and understand things better when they are compared to something familiar or a more simple idea.
8. The use of a metaphor or story to represent an idea before explaining the literal meaning of the story can be a way for the reader to formulate the same idea that the author has managed to come up with. If the reader is able to come to the same conclusions as the author did they are more easily able to understand the idea and relate to it, then if they were given a literal explanation of the idea.

9. Metaphors are good ways to put the philosophical idea into perspective because the reader can see it in a way that makes the idea more relatable. However, a good balance of the text and the metaphor would be the best way to teach a philosophical idea because students learn differently. Some need the raw idea in front of them while others need to be exposed to the metaphorically. I sometimes liked it better when I read the literal interpretation first but in terms of stimulating critical thinking, the metaphor did a better job in the long run.

10. If the metaphor accurately and precisely conveys the concept to the reader it is appropriate to use it, but often forced metaphors do not completely do justice to the concept the writer is trying to convey. In this case, the use of metaphor only confuses the reader and pulls their focus away from the main concept. I found this to happen in the reading we had about John Locke’s blank tablet theory about the nature of the mind. I thought it would have been just as effective if he just said that the mind is formed devoid of prior knowledge at birth and that we learn everything we know. I would have understood the concept just as well without the blank tablet metaphor.

11. Personally, I like to learn about the literal meaning of a concept and then get introduced to a metaphor that may be more relatable. When I hear the story I already have knowledge of the concept and usually then come to the ‘Oh, I see’, moment.

1.6 Concluding Remarks

As is clear from the last two student quotes, using metaphors prior to literal explanations is not for everyone. These two students out of the twenty in the class preferred the more traditional approach. It was interesting that they happened to have studied some philosophy prior to this class, and were more confident in their ability to think abstractly. Most, however, found what worked best to be placing the metaphorical interpretation prior to the literal. My own experience tells me that by using this latter approach I was able to introduce more complex, abstract ideas more effectively. It is not easy to get eighteen year old students to seriously question some of their basic philosophical beliefs without doing so. Using Descartes’ ‘dream’ metaphor, for example, allows students fairly easily to question the existence of the world, as using the ‘Matrix’ metaphor makes it easier to question its nature. The ‘mind as computer software’ metaphor allows students to learn more easily what Kant claimed about knowledge and reality, while the ‘ring of Gyges’ story allows them to question the purpose of morality.

If one goal of an introductory course is to teach some content, another is to teach habits of thinking, the habits especially employed by philosophers--critical and creative thinking skills and the habit of questioning basic beliefs. Most philosophy courses enhance critical thinking skills, but examining and creating metaphors also help to develop creative thinking skills. Some of the great discoveries in science, philosophy and other fields have come from comparing two seemingly unrelated areas and finding that one illuminates the other. In addition to critical and creative thinking, thinking like a philosopher also involves what may be what this course best models--identifying and questioning basic beliefs or assumptions. I believe that using metaphors to introduce philosophical ideas contributes a great deal to the development of this skill as well.