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Metaphor, Blending, and Cultural Variation: A Reply to Camus

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In a recent article in this journal, Rina Marie Camus (Camus 2017) frames her discussion of cross-cultural variations in the structure and meaning of the archery metaphor as a corrective to what is supposedly my own view of metaphor. Her portrayal of my view is inaccurate and out of date, and since such misconceptions about my work are not uncommon in the field I find myself moved to write a response.

It is easiest to begin with an extended citation from the beginning of Camus' article:

> One author who vigorously applies contemporary metaphor theories in the study of Chinese texts is Edward Slingerland. I share his concern over the lingering prevalence of the idea that imagistic conceptualizing is a unique feature of Chinese thought that sets it apart from the West (Slingerland 2011: 1–4). However, my analysis of the archery metaphor will vary significantly from Slingerland's treatment of terms such as the "Self" (*ji* 己; *shen* 身) in the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 or "effortless action" (*wu-wei* 無為) in Confucian and Daoist texts as conceptual metaphors (see Slingerland 2000, 2004b). Following a cognitive-linguistic approach, Slingerland sees in metaphor use manifestations of underlying metaphysical structures of human cognition which are valid across time, space, and culture since they ultimately derive from common bodily experiences (Slingerland 2004a, 2011). Such a view enables him to hold that conceptions of self in the Zhuangzi and of modern Americans are no different from each other (Slingerland 2004b: 327, 329), or that *wu wei* stands for the same spiritual ideal for Confucians and Daoists, as a matter of fact, "for *all* of the early mainstream Chinese thinkers" and later Buddhists and Neo-Confucianists as well (Slingerland 2000: 295–297, italics in the original). While we can grant that there are across-the-board embodied experiences which shape the way humans conceptualize and reason, Slingerland's quest for universal patterns overlooks the specificities and

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> saliencies of traditions which are, in fact, just as manifest in their use of metaphors. Slingerland and his sources' account of human cognition—as arising, that is, from basic corporeal experiences which generate the sensorimotor schemas that ground understanding of abstract concepts—does not take into account the variety of experiences which configure human cognition, in particular, that of belonging to a cultural milieu. (Camus 2017: 166)

There are several minor odd features of this account worth commenting upon at the outset. Slingerland 2000 has nothing to do with conceptual metaphor theory, pre-dating my engagement with cognitive linguistics by several years; although I mention metaphors for *wu-wei* in passing in Slingerland 2004b (i.e., "Slingerland 2004" in "References" of this article), my main treatment of this subject is the monograph Slingerland 2003, which is not mentioned by Camus. I also do not, in 2004b, claim that conceptions of the self in the *Zhuangzi* and among modern Americans "are no different from each other"; I merely claim that modern Americans are capable of *understanding* early Chinese views of the self, because they have access to the same basic metaphors, when properly guided by a person who knows the text. Camus further claims that I posit "underlying *metaphysical* structures of human cognition" (italics mine), while in a footnote on the same page complaining that my position is "starkly physicalist." I would cop to being a physicalist, properly understood—Camus' assertion in the same footnote that I view humans as "atomic objects" suggests she does not at all understand my views on physicalism, as I will explain below. It is generally the case, however, that physicalists eschew metaphysical claims, as I surely do. Finally, on the opening page of her article, Camus describes Fauconnier and Turner 2002 as concerned with conceptual metaphor theory, whereas their focus is, in fact, blending theory. This is an extremely important distinction, as I will also clarify below, and perhaps underlies some of the other confusions in her paper.

It is certainly the case that, writing in an environment that I saw as characterized by wild-eyed, extreme social constructivism, my early work on metaphor and blending theory emphasized universalist themes, particularly the manner in which shared embodied experience can serve as a bridge to the cultural other. Even in my earliest work, however, I acknowledged that the repertoire of basic, embodied metaphors ("primary metaphors") shared cross-culturally coexist with a massive number of culturally-specific metaphors produced by new technologies (the Mind as Computer metaphor), new social practices (Time as a Resource as a likely product of the industrial revolution and wage labor), background metaphysical commitments (pre-Buddhist vs. Buddhist uses of the Mind as Mirror metaphor), or the specifics of cultural practices (such as the technical details of early Chinese water management practices) (Slingerland 2003: 26, 272; 2005: 580).

Moreover, by 2005 I was focusing less on Lakoff and Johnson-style conceptual metaphors, where a single source domain structures a single target domain, and more on pushing forward Fauconnier and Turner's conceptual blending theory. Blending theory encompasses conceptual metaphors (which it characterizes as "single-scope" blends), but goes beyond them to note that many metaphorical constructions are double- or multiple-scope blends, where the structure of two or more source domains

is selectively recruited into a central "blend," which therefore possesses its own, novel emergent structure. One of my theoretical contributions to this field was to show, concretely, how multiple-scope blends are constructed (Fauconnier and Turner focused on double-scope blends). I also pointed out that blends can, in turn, get recruited as a source input to *other* blends, getting us several "ratchet turns" away from any kind of embodied, cross-cultural commonality.

These themes are explored in Slingerland 2005, where I trace out some complex, and very culturally-specific, blends constructed in *Mencius* 3A5 and 6A1–2. They are only fully fleshed out, however, in Slingerland 2008, where I devote an entire chapter (Ch. 4, "Grounding Cultural Variation in the Body") to an embodied, physicalist account of cultural variation. This monograph has had an impact on a wide variety of fields in the humanities, but—perhaps because it does not exclusively focus on early China—has been almost entirely ignored in the study of early Chinese thought. It might therefore be worth briefly rehearsing some of my arguments there. I begin by noting that "the claim that human beings share a set of cognitive and normative universals needs to be reconciled with the blooming, buzzing cultural variety that is the single most salient phenomenon to humanists" (Slingerland 2008: 151), going on to observe:

> There is considerable evidence from cross-cultural psychology that … various [cultural] practices, and the environments that these practices create, can result in distinct schemas at fairly early stages of development…. It is thus important to balance the exploration of human universals … with the recognition that human cognitive fluidity, ratcheted up over time by cultural entrenchment, can shape human perceptions and desires in quite novel and idiosyncratic ways, from the subtle Japanese aesthetic sentiment of *mono no aware* (lit. "the sorrow of things") to the sort of "cultivated needs," such as a taste for fine wines or luxury automobiles, explored in such depth by Pierre Bourdieu. (Slingerland 2008: 151)

In this chapter I also engage in an extended analysis of the concept of *qi* 氣 as developed in *Mencius* 2A2, showing how conceptual blending can cause shared, species-typical normative reactions to be directed to novel objects and enables the creation of entirely new, culturally-specific entities such as *qi*, "which blends the characteristics of water, growing things, and social subordinates in an entirely unique way" (Slingerland 2008: 206–207). "In subsequent Chinese thought and cultural practice," I argue, "this new entity began to serve as an input domain in its own right, being drawn on in order to understand other domains such as the movement of humors in the body or the psyche of a calligrapher. This sort of ratcheted innovation is quite common and is a powerful engine for cultural creativity" (Slingerland 2008: 207).

I also spend considerable time in this chapter discussing how conceptual blends get built into artifacts, tools, buildings and landscapes, becoming part of the physical environment, which for human beings is costructured by genes and culture. Reviewing (at that time) more recent work in cognitive linguistics that goes beyond Lakoff and Johnson (e.g., Gibbs 1999; Kimmel 2005), I note that the field has come to focus less on individual acultural humans moving through a pre-given physical world and more on humans as social and cultural beings, inhabitants of always already culturally-transformed landscapes. I cite work by scholars such as Sinha and Jensen de Lopez, who document how different types of containers available in Zapotec and Danish

societies effect the development of even such basic schemas as *under* and *in*, or Guerts, who describes how the practice of carrying loads on one's head in the Anlo-Ewe culture of Ghana results in a more nuanced conception of the *balance* schema, as well as a more central role for this metaphor in local discourse (Sinha and Jensen de Lopez 2000; Guerts 2003). In the field of cognitive neuroscience, I explore work documenting the fundamental reorganization of cortical areas in the brain in Braille readers (Pascuale-Leone and Torres 1993) or professional string-instrument players (Elbert, Pantev, Wienbruch, Rocks, and Taub 1995), that must, in turn, impact the way in which these subcommunities experience and construct conceptual metaphors and blends. I characterize all of this work as "an important corrective to some earlier versions of cognitive linguistics that focused exclusively on the individual human body and the generic physical environment, without taking into account the extent that, especially for modern human beings, the physical environment is pervaded with cultural information" (Slingerland 2008: 211).

Ultimately, I do tie all of this back into embodied commonality. I argue that, once anthropologists, archaeologists, historians or linguists have unpacked or analyzed cultural variation in conceptual schemas, we are then in a position to understand them. The conception of *qi* as developed in *Mencius* 2A2 can be decomposed into the conceptual primitives that serve as its source domains. Griet Vankeerberghen has argued that our understanding of the metaphor of *quan* 權 ("weighing"/ "discretion") in early texts has sometimes been distorted because later readers draw upon the image of a simple balance scale or steelyard scale to interpret the metaphor (Vankeerberghen 2005/2006). Textual evidence, however, suggests that early writers had in mind at least three distinct image schemas, each with their own specific entailments based upon concrete physical practices of weighing. Understanding one of these requires familiarity with a "transitional" or hybrid scale, which combines aspects of the simple balance and steelyard scales, and has been discovered in recent archeological work. Once we are familiarized with the structure and function of this "transitional" scale, however, this particular usage of the metaphor can be properly understood. Similarly, the distinctive features of Anlo-Ewe containers may bring with them culturally-specific conceptions of *in* or *under*, but having been shown pictures of these containers, videos of them being used, or (ideally) being able to interact with them physically myself, I can come to understand these novel image schemas. If this were not the case, it is exceedingly unclear how anthropologists, archaeologists, or historians would go about their work.

I am perfectly happy to have colleagues critique my view of cognitive linguistics, embodied cognition, physicalism, or the relationship between the sciences and the humanities. Like most of us, though, I prefer that they critique an up-to-date, comprehensive version of my views on these topics, or at least something written since the first George W. Bush administration—however much that era may seem like a halcyon Golden Age from the perspective of contemporary politics. Completely unreviewed and virtually unread by colleagues in my primary field of expertise, Slingerland 2008 nonetheless stubbornly *exists*, a peer-reviewed monograph from a major university press widely available in libraries or in an economical paperback edition, which is more than can be said for most monographs in our field. (For those born in the post-Napster era, with their own distinct views on intellectual property rights, I would also note that this book has been widely pirated, and can be easily downloaded in pdf form.) In

Slingerland 2011, I also make it very clear that I have moved on from the earliest stages of conceptual metaphor theory—which is incidentally something I would strongly recommend to *all* of my colleagues, most of whom continue to attack or draw upon Lakoff and Johnson publications from the 1980s and 1990s, as if they have not read anything new since they left graduate school. Slingerland 2011 (conveniently published in this very journal and cited by Camus) not only lays out the basics of blending theory but points scholars to relevant portions of my 2008 monograph. With regard to a complex, social practice such as archery, we would expect the specific entailments of an archery metaphor to vary cross-culturally, as Camus does an excellent job of documenting. To portray this as a corrective to, or indictment of, my position on metaphor, however, is (if I may borrow the archery trope myself) to be taking aim at a target that has long ago moved on.

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