

Can a metaphor change the concept?

Animal metaphors shaping ‘polypragmosynē’ in Plutarch’s “On curiosity”

Angelina Gerus
(University of Warsaw)

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Ethical concepts lie at the heart of Plutarch of Chaeronea’s writings, and his treatise “Peri polypragmosynēs”, “On Curiosity” (post 96 AD), is no exception. This notion, paramount for the Athenian polis and its citizens (Ehrenberg 1947, Adkins 1976), defies both adequate interlingual translation and exhaustive mapping of its semantic frame. However, the Chaeronean forges a means for bringing ‘polypragmosynē’ (‘curiosity’) closer to the reader: He employs analogy, primarily in the form of metaphor, and conceives this abstract idea, despite its elusive denotation, via connotative components emerging from a series of concrete images. Just like this, the meddlesomeness takes the form of a hen, a weasel or a hound. This raises the question: how do these metaphors affect the concept’s structure?

In this study, situated within the frameworks of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, Kovecses 2020) and the Conceptual Blending Theory (Grady et al. 1999, Fauconnier and Turner 2002), I will discuss Plutarch’s method of metaphorical conceptualisation applied to ‘curiosity’ in “Peri polypragmosynēs”. Animal metaphors, owing to their artistic prominence and profound relevance for the author’s metaphysics, will serve as examples. Firstly, I will review a range of source and target domains Plutarch chooses to juxtapose. Then, I will focus on the interaction between the schematic structures of these domains; in particular, the meaning shifts it entails (Evans 2009). Finally, moving from the semantic level to the conceptual one, I will trace linguistic construal operations (Mac Cormac 1985, Langacker 2013) which occur during metaphor processing and participate in the concept’s re-formation.

The discursive nature of the treatise, shared between philosophy and rhetoric, requires a specific approach for understanding metaphors and their context. Hence, I introduce literary criticism into my analysis. Close reading and hermeneutics, which place textual nuances within relevant cultural and historical implications, will help identify metaphors of ‘polypragmosynē’ and explain their motivation. Intertextuality, in turn, will question the novelty of Plutarch’s comprehension of the ancient Greek ‘curiosity’. This paper, although essentially qualitative, will additionally provide a quantitative account on the metaphors in this treatise, notably on their recurrence and variability in Plutarch’s other works. This complex approach shall clarify two main points: first, the extent and manner in which animal metaphors transform the chosen concept; and second, the scale on which the author uses this figure of speech (and thought) as a cognitive tool in concept formation.

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