

Thinking of Thinking: Conceptual Metaphors of Cognition in the Plutarchan Corpus

What is the human mind? How does it work? These questions can be obviously addressed to scientists and philosophers. It turns out, however, that each of us “ordinary people” unconsciously uses a certain theory of mind. Every day we talk about our own and others’ mental life, and we usually understand each other well. After all, the mind is a kind of container in the head that holds various information, thoughts, and beliefs. That is why we say that something “enters one’s mind” or that someone “bears something in mind”; one can also “open” or “close mind to something.” We may also talk about the mind as a machine: we tell someone to “turn on your brain” or say that our brain “won’t work without coffee.” And our thoughts? They are objects manipulated by us in various ways. Thus we say that someone “passed on knowledge to someone”, that we “share opinions” or “exchange ideas”; we can also “hide our thoughts.” We speak of the mind as a container and about thoughts as objects because both the mind and thoughts are abstract concepts that cannot be seen or touched. We thus have to try to imagine them with things which do have visible and tangible qualities. In other words, we have to use metaphors.

Not only do we use metaphors to talk about the mind, we use them to think about it, and we cannot really think otherwise than with metaphors. This thesis was emphatically formulated in the 1980s by American linguists, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. They studied the contemporary English language and found that metaphors are not merely linguistic “ornaments”, but reflect our way of thinking about the world around us. The metaphors we use to describe a certain abstract domain are often systematic in nature, as in the metaphor MIND IS A CONTAINER and THOUGHT IS AN OBJECT. As we have seen, there are many linguistic expressions that base their meaning on these associations and with which we think about acquiring knowledge, learning, or understanding. By looking at language, we can try to reconstruct the folk (i.e. popular) theory that people use, and think about its consequences for their understanding of the world, their culture and the organization of society. For example, if thoughts are objects that can simply be put into a mind-container, perhaps we mean educating children at school simply as putting things in their heads and asking them to get them out of their heads when needed.

Of course, just because we think today in terms of MIND IS A MACHINE or A CONTAINER does not mean that people in different cultures or from distant eras think the same way. In our research, we want to answer the question of how the mind was thought of by the ancient Greeks, distant from us in time by nearly two thousand years. We cannot talk to them, so we will use the texts they left behind. We will focus on the works of the ancient Greek scholar, writer and philosopher from the 2nd century CE Plutarch of Chaeronea. The collection of his works consists of more than a hundred texts which makes it one of the largest ancient collections of writings that have originated from a single pen. In this way, we will try to capture a certain state of affairs at a specific historical moment.

Thanks to our preliminary research, we already know a few associations related to the mind and its operation in ancient Greek. For example, REASON is a RULER who “reigns” the body and soul, which in turn “obey him.” Mind can also be a CHARIOTEER who “pulls the reins” and “restrains” the soul and body. The SOUL by contrast is sometimes a HOUSE and looks at the world through the eyes that are WINDOWS. VIEWS are OBJECTS in space because “summarizing” them means running from one to the other. SUPERSTITION is a FISH NET, which “binds” the person who holds them. These few examples already show how diverse the metaphors related to the functioning of the mind are in ancient Greek. They capture the invisible and the abstract with concrete and more tangible images and phenomena, known from the everyday life of those times. They draw from various areas of culture and social life, such as politics (reason as a ruler), sport (reason as a charioteer), construction (soul as a building), spatial relations (views as points in the space), and even fishing (superstition as a fishing net).

Thanks to our planned research, we want to identify as many such associations as possible that will tell us what and how the ancient Greeks of Plutarch’s time thought about thinking. This way we will also learn more about the phenomena of culture and social life on which these associations are based, and we will understand better how the ancient people in the time of Plutarch understood e.g. education. We will also know in what way these associations are dependent on how they imagined the human mind, responsibility or justice. Our project thus aims to read Plutarch's texts from a different angle than before, because the issues described here have not yet been sufficiently studied this way.