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Morgan's Legacy in Theorizing and Understanding Organizations

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Key Learning Points

- Understand the difference between diverse ways of viewing metaphor, including cognitive and discursive perspectives.
- Be able to compare different and creative ways of using metaphor practically for organizational analysis.
- Understand the basic characteristics of metaphors that make them more likely to be used by managers and people within organizations.
- Foster critical reflection on the possibility of alternative and future metaphors as images of organization.

A classic but still widespread idea of organizations is based on an **image** of organizations as if they are machines that are efficiently designed to produce certain outputs and meet predefined targets. This particular image, which Morgan (1986) describes in *Images of Organization* as one of eight **master tropes**, goes back to Frederick Winslow Taylor's formulation of industrial bureaucracy in

the early 1900s, better known as scientific management, which involved a mixture of ideas and principles from mechanical engineering and “**social physics.**” The assumption underlying this image was that productivity could be enhanced by specifying cause and effect in the production process, similar to the controlled mechanics of a machine. This particular image laid the foundation for many of the technical approaches to understanding and managing organizations (e.g., control systems, cost-savings, “human resources” management) that are still with us today and are, perhaps somewhat ironically, making a comeback in this digital age (*Economist*, 2015).

What this example suggests is that people use images to conceptualize and think of organizations. Different people may also use different images or alternate between images, an observation that tells us that the nature of reality does not dictate the way that reality is represented in people's minds and articulated to one another. Our **imagination** allows us to frame the same phenomenon in different and at times incompatible ways (Searle, 2010). An organization can be thought of as a machine, organism, brain, culture, political system, psychic prison, flux, or instrument of domination (among many other things) depending on how we mentally imagine it for ourselves (Morgan, 1986), which in turn depends on what we choose to focus on and what we choose to ignore—something that Morgan describes so well in his book (see Chapter 10 in Morgan, 2006). The way in which we imagine an organization in alternative ways in turn leads to alternative decisions and courses of actions with direct consequences for ourselves as well as for the economy and society at large. Alternative images also reveal different ideological positions on how organizations can best accomplish their ends and on how workers and employees, based on their abilities and motivations, should be controlled (Barley & Kunda, 1992). Often, alternative ways of **imagining** and **framing** an organization are pitted against each other, and the disputants struggle to show that their framing is more apt. At this point, one may wonder what it all matters that people in general produce these images as rival accounts or even as fully fledged theories of organizations.

As Morgan (1980, 1983) showed so astutely, these different images are not just in a strictly academic sense about how we use words and entire vocabularies such as “business process reengineering” or “corporate citizen” to conceptualize organizations and to think about them. Using these words says more generally about the relation of words to reality—the way that managers, employees, consultants, politicians, and everyone else commit themselves to a shared understanding of what organizations are, and the ways their thoughts are anchors to developments and situations in the world. It is also about the relation of words and vocabularies to a community—how words when they are introduced come to evoke the same idea in an entire community, so that people can understand one another when they use them. Words and the language that we use to define organizations evoke images of what we believe organizations are or indeed should or can be.

Morgan (1980, 1983) also made the intriguing observation that our vocabulary to describe organizations is inherently **metaphorical**, as opposed to literal. **Linguistically**, a metaphor is a “figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to something to which it is not literally applicable” (Oxford English Dictionary). Our words disclose conceptions of organizations *as if* they are machines, social structures, computers, or corporate citizens (among many other things). Organizations are of

course not literally machines or citizens (at least not in how we originally understand these concepts). However, as Morgan showed, by transferring these words from their original **domain** to the sphere of organizations, we are able to extend our thinking. In other words, mobilizing words from other domains enables us to cognitively frame and understand organizations in novel and multiple ways. It opens up possibilities for seeing and understanding organizations that would otherwise not be there if we restricted ourselves to a set of literal words and a fixed set of categories for understanding organizations (Morgan, 1980, 1983). In other words, metaphors give us alternative ways of imagining and framing organizations, a feat of language and thought that explains how and why there is such wide variety and change in our thinking about organizations.

In this chapter, I build on Morgan's initial and revealing observations about the metaphorical nature of our talk and thought about organizations. I describe from a **cognitive perspective** how metaphors work and persist, and I suggest some reasons for why certain metaphors, compared with others, are more likely to fall into favor with larger groups of people, including policy makers, managers, entrepreneurs, and employees in organizations. These reasons all boil down to whether a metaphor, and the image that it produces, offers an easily imaginable and controllable picture of organizations—one that in effect brings it into the purview of human understanding. I end the chapter with some reflections on the hold of such images over our collective imagination and the implications that this has for theory and practice.

Morgan and Metaphors

Past research has suggested that the dynamics by which new metaphors are introduced and become common usage are stubbornly chaotic (Cornelissen, 2006; Cornelissen & Kafourou, 2007). The reason for this, it has been suggested, is that it follows a cultural pattern of diffusion with some metaphors surviving, while others are lost. Like practices in a culture (e.g., fashions, rituals, beliefs), words in a language must originate with an innovator, must then appeal to the innovator's social contacts and then to the social contacts' contacts, and so on, until a word becomes endemic to a community. The variety and changing nature of our images of organizations similarly depends on the extent to which a new metaphor resonates with already common and socially shared understandings of organizations. Resonance occurs because of a similarity between the novel metaphor and our existing understanding or because the metaphor offers a striking contrast with our present language and thought (Oswick et al., 2004). The recent metaphor of organizations as networked forms of distributed intelligence (e.g., Gore, 1996) caught on because it not only built on but also contrasted with traditional mechanistic and computational images. This cultural mechanism holds a lesson for our understanding of organizations more generally. Our language and thought tends to branch out to the extent that it is conditioned by prior, socially shared understandings. For example, images of **social systems** followed machine images of organization, **connectionist images** of distributed intelligence elaborated on computational images, evolutionary images of organization were challenged by images of organizations as chaotic and complex adaptive systems, and so on. Such a stacking of metaphors is also the name of the

game in academic research, in which scholars are pressed to find contrasting images with earlier work (Boxenbaum & Rouleau, 2011; Cornelissen & Durand, 2014).

A cognitive interpretation of metaphor casts a different but complementary light on the application of metaphor to organizations. Amid the cultural dynamics at play, metaphors are not simply markers or empty vessels in a cultural **language game**. Instead, metaphors are cognitively useful and essential in our reasoning about abstract or complex subjects such as organizations. This cognitive interpretation is the one that I associate most closely with Morgan (1980, 1983, 1986), compared with more discursive or even **philosophical accounts of metaphor** (see Putnam et al., 2004). Morgan is essentially concerned with metaphors as cognitively coherent constellations of ideas and is far less bothered about more linguistic questions of how metaphor is identified in speech (see Cornelissen, Oswick, Christensen, & Phillips, 2008). Like Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 1999) before him, Morgan is mostly concerned with the practical reality of metaphor, as a basic form of human cognition.

From this cognitive perspective, metaphors point in fact to an obvious way in which people learn to reason about abstract or complex concepts. They would notice, or have pointed out to them, a parallel between a realm that they already understand and an abstract or complex realm that they do not yet understand. By accessing and transferring knowledge from a known domain to an as yet unknown or difficult to know complex or abstract domain, people can understand otherwise inaccessible concepts. For this reason, metaphor is not considered an ornamental flourish of language; rather, it is an essential part of thought: "Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 3). In this cognitive view, metaphors are not only useful but also essential as ways of thinking about abstract and complex subjects such as organizations (Morgan, 1980). They bring organizations into the confines of a single image by drawing on parallels between organizations and other, concrete domains of knowledge (Cornelissen & Kafouros, 2008). Thus, when we liken an organization to a machine, we use our knowledge of machines to form an image of what an organization is like. The metaphor frames our understanding of the organization in a distinctive but partial way. Metaphors tend to produce partial insights because a particular image highlights certain interpretations at the expense of others. The image of an organization as a machine brings aspects of efficiency and engineering into focus but ignores the human aspects. The metaphor is thus enlightening and biased or limiting at the same time (Morgan, 1986); this assumption is also shared by **discursive approaches**, although they highlight the nature of partial emphasis as dissonance and resonance (in speech and texts) versus the emphasis that is placed here on partial forms of cognitive understanding.

Metaphors also aid our reasoning as tools of inference that can be carried over from a conventional to novel domain, where they can do real work. They can power sophisticated inferences (Cornelissen, 2005, 2012; Cornelissen & Clarke, 2010). For example, when an organization is seen as a machine, it is cast as a functional unity or assembly serving various purposes and consisting of distinct, although interconnected, mechanical parts that are not themselves self-adapting. Hence, to make an organization work, managers need to specify the functional connections between the parts (and document these in an organizational chart or process documents), they must control the energy source or force (i.e., "human resources") that gets it to operate, and they need to redesign specific parts or connections between parts whenever

these are faulty or malfunctioning. Such redesign may result in job losses, but the machine image suggests that such losses are not problematic because an employee is merely a resource or commodity that can be acquired and traded. The employment relationship, in turn, is an arm's-length transaction based on market conditions and the value of the resource or commodity for organizational operations.

When managers **enact** such an image of the organization and the employment relationship, it has predictable consequences that may be self-reinforcing: just as organizations feel no particular social obligation or moral tie to their employees, employees, now told to look out for themselves, do precisely that (e.g., Haran, 2013). In other words, metaphors are not merely rival frames but have real-world consequences whenever they are enacted—a point that Morgan has stressed on numerous occasions (see Chapter 10 in Morgan, 2006).

How Metaphors Work

Having outlined some reasons for why metaphorical language and thought plays a central role in our understanding of organizations, the logical next question to ask is how metaphors emerge and *work*. Every metaphor has to come from somewhere. Perhaps one might think that they are thought out and disseminated by an elite corps of academic writers, consultants, and business gurus and are then hoarded by the wider populace. Given the prevalence of metaphor in our language about organizations, it seems more likely that they are the natural products of the way everyone's mind works. If so, we should be able to account for how people in the act of sensing deep correspondences between superficially different realms construct useful metaphors for thinking about organizations.

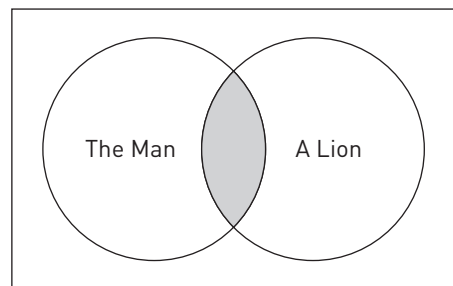
In his groundbreaking text, Morgan (1986, 1997, 2006) argued that people sense the connection by “seeing” or identifying a single dimension that relates to the combined realms. He argued that metaphor proceeds through implicit or explicit assertions that A *is* (or is like) B. For example, when we say “the man is a lion,” we assert that the man shares features or characteristics with the lion, such as being strong and ferocious (Morgan, 2006, pp. 4–5). Morgan's account of metaphor follows a so-called **comparison model** of how metaphor works (Black, 1962; Cornelissen, 2005). In this model, which goes back to Aristotle's earliest writings, the development and interpretation of a metaphor is assumed to involve a comparison of concepts or domains to determine what discrete properties or relations that apply to the one can also apply to the other in the same or a similar sense. In short, metaphor is seen as a comparison in which the first concept A (i.e., the **target**) is asserted to bear a partial resemblance to the second concept B (i.e., the source). Figure 3.1 (from Morgan, 2006, p. 5) illustrates this model of how metaphor works. In Morgan's traditional view, a metaphor is understood when we “see” the connection between two concepts or domains and are able to “visualize” the “**ground**”—namely, those features that are shared by both. In other words, we understand metaphors when the source allows us to identify a feature (or set of features) already present in our understanding of the target, albeit that those features may initially not have been that salient to us. The productive force of metaphors, in other words, comes from making connections between domains “salient” or “visible.”

The key limitation of the comparison account is that it is unable to account for how people discern such *new* metaphorical connections involving a set of entities that **interact** in particular ways. Recall that metaphors are powerful to the extent that they *create* new insights and new ways of analyzing and managing organizations; they do not simply uncover already existing similarities. Metaphors do not just draw out mere aspects of sameness; if they did, they would only make “the familiar more familiar” (Oswick, Keenoy, & Grant, 2002, p. 295). Instead, this comparison account suggests that metaphorical thinking is severely constrained to picking up hackneyed metaphors that already permeate our language about organizations and capture all there is to capture about organizations (Cornelissen, 2005).

Metaphors, by their very nature, are creative tools of human cognition for drawing parallels between domains of knowledge in order to expand our current knowledge into previously unrecognized possibilities (Morgan, 1997). A metaphor cannot be reduced to already present features or attributes because when these are specified, one does not get the metaphorical effect in question. This is the case because the characteristics or features of the source often cannot be applied directly to the target, as the features they “share” are often only shared metaphorically (and not literally). For example, the connection between organizations and machines is only a metaphorical one that aids our thinking about organizations. These concepts do not literally share any features or characteristics (which is why the Venn diagram in Figure 3.1 is misleading). Prior to their metaphorical comparison, we did not even conceive of a connection between organizations and machines. Thus, a metaphor *creates* similarity (as a correspondence is *constructed*) instead of simply emphasizing and visualizing preexisting (but previously unnoticed) similarities in the features of the constituent concepts or domains.

Now, a more useful model of metaphor is one that recognizes the creative potential of metaphor and accounts for how new insights and understandings emerge from using a metaphor (Cornelissen, 2005). This approach focuses on correspondences between two concepts or domains that emerge as counterpart connections that we construct between the two concepts or domains. Once a correspondence is constructed, the two concepts or domains are in turn “blended” with one another as a way of reordering our understanding of the target or by creating an emergent meaning that did not exist in each of the two concepts or domains separately. For example, when we say “the man is a lion” (the classic example that Morgan uses), we reorder our understanding of the kind of bravery and ferocity that we think a man is capable of based on our understanding of lions. The metaphor, in other words, leads us to reorder and reexamine our understanding of this particular man. Similarly, when we think of organizations as machines, we completely

FIGURE 3.1 • Metaphor as Seeing Similarities



Source: Reproduced from Morgan (2006, p. 5).

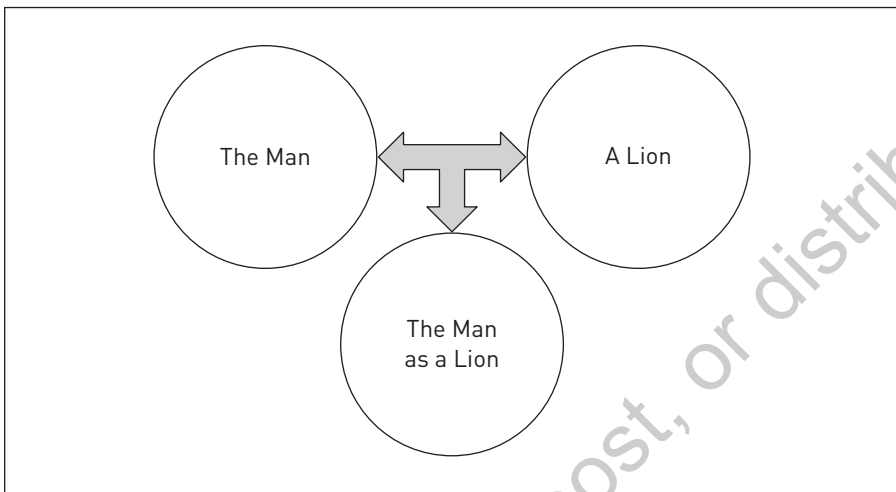
recast our understanding of organizations. We blend the two domains to conceive of an organization as a functional unity with distinct, although interconnected, parts; to conceive of work as controlled and automated motions; and to conceive of employees as human resources or commodities. The intricate blending or mixing of these two domains into one and the same image also means that it is often difficult for people to still recognize the active metaphorical nature of the image whenever we use it to think about organizations. In other words, blending contributes to the belief that an organization *is* a machine and not just a useful way of thinking about organizations.

In some cases, the blending of the two domains is elaborated by people in such a way that new meanings or insights are created that did not exist in them previously. To illustrate, consider the popular idea that an organization has an identity, similar to a human being. The initial correspondence that informed this metaphor was that within a public context, third parties ascribe identity traits to both entities—organizations and individuals—in order to form an image of both of them. Indeed, organizational psychologists have long pointed out that stakeholders of an organization are inclined to perceive an organization in corporeal terms and to credit it with identity traits, just as they would an individual person (Bakan, 2004; Marchand, 1998). Based on this correspondence, ideas about identity in social psychology were transferred and blended with elements in our understanding of organization.

For example, the idea that in displays of our identity as human beings we express a sense of personal distinctness, a sense of personal continuity, and a sense of personal autonomy was used to reorder our understanding of organizations. Organizations were subsequently understood to have an identity consisting of 1) a claimed central character (corporate characteristics that are seen as the essence), 2) a claimed distinctiveness (corporate characteristics that distinguish the organization from others), and 3) a claimed **temporal continuity** (corporate characteristics that exhibit sameness over time) (e.g., Albert & Whetten, 1985).

However, academic writers and managers soon realized that organizations are not human beings. The blend was therefore elaborated with the idea that the identity of an organization is less enduring and more flexible than the identities of human beings (e.g., Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000). The identity of an organization mutates as a result of internal organizational changes (e.g., a restructuring or the introduction of new technologies) and interactions with stakeholders. As organizations change and mutate over time, their identities will similarly evolve. Thus, the idea of the adaptive nature of an organization's identity emerged from the elaboration of the blend.

Figure 3.2 visualizes this process of how metaphor creates meaning through the blending of two concepts or domains. First, when people develop a metaphor, or have one pointed out to them, they start with constructing a basic correspondence between two domains. For example, the correspondence between the man and a lion may be that they are both male creatures that inhabit our planet. Once a correspondence is constructed, people may then blend the two domains into one and the same image, which means that they transfer information from both the target ("the man") and the source ("a lion") and use the information to elaborate and complete a coherent, blended image of the man *as* a lion. The novel image, in turn, leads us to rethink

FIGURE 3.2 • Metaphor as the Blending of Two Concepts or Domains

our concept of the man, which has been recast as a result of the blend. When we recognize this ability of metaphors to completely change our understanding of a particular subject, we begin to appreciate their true power as a way of bringing progressive viewpoints to bear upon the subject of organization.

Metaphors and Theories of Organization

Given the central role of metaphors for conceptualizing and understanding organizations, one would expect a large amount of time and energy being devoted within academic circles to understanding the very processes by which they are generated and the outcomes they have for everyone involved with organizations. Yet research on the topic over the years has been scant; in many ways, it is still seen as a fringe subject compared with other more “mainstream” subjects and research questions. There are the occasional bursts of attention, such as the special issue on theory building in the *Academy of Management Review* in 2011, with virtually all articles in that issue acknowledging the foundational role of metaphors for thinking about organizations (e.g., Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011; Boxenbaum & Rouleau, 2011; Oswick, Fleming, & Hanlon, 2011; Shepherd & Sutcliffe, 2011). However, by and large, the significance of metaphor to our understanding of organizations is not matched with a similar amount of research and attempts at a more detailed understanding. To some extent, this lack of attention reflects the usual ebb and flow of scholarly research, in which metaphor as a subject had its heyday in the 1980s amid broader meta-theoretical discussions on paradigms, methods, and theory but ebbed away in the decades afterward. Those who, in fact, were still writing about metaphor afterward were genuine enthusiasts or were heavily influenced by Morgan, with his work leaving a formative and lasting imprint on their own scholarship (e.g., Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011).

This lack of attention has a wider bearing on the academic community. One direct consequence is that prominent scholars in economics, sociology, and organizational theory do not routinely reflect on the theories and the assumptions they work from *as* metaphors. To give one example, economists and economic sociologists tend to define organizations in figurative terms as natural, self-constituted individuals underpinned by a nexus of specific treaties and contracts (e.g., Fama & Jensen, 1985). For example, Fama and Jensen (1985, p. 101) simply assume that organizations can be modeled as economic agents and “. . . ‘as if’ they come from the maximization of an objective function—for example, the value maximization rule of the financial economics literature.” Somewhat similarly, institutional sociologists cast organizations in the image of unitary social actors (e.g., King, Felin, & Whetten, 2010), who have an intentionality and agency that transcends any of its members who instead merely act “‘as if’ the organization is willing the action to be so” (King et al., 2010, p. 295). In both instances, researchers implicitly assign a role to metaphor (note the “as if” in their reasoning) as part of their theorizing and use such metaphors as part of their research. Yet they hardly reflect on such metaphors, nor do they think about whether those same metaphors are used by individuals interacting with, or acting on behalf of, an organization in the real world. In fact, these researchers often go out of their way to suggest that their theorizing about organizations is not in the slightest metaphorical (e.g., see Hannan & Freeman, 1989), as if that would mean that their credibility as serious academics who write “literal” and formal theory would be challenged.

Writing about the image of organizations as economic agents, Fama and Jensen (1985) stress that they are using a “literal” analogy rather than a metaphor, arguing that their thinking involves a simple extension of the economic agency of natural persons to that of the organization, who as an agency-bearing “individual” by law (Ghoshal, 2005; Jensen & Meckling, 1994) is able to engage in economic transactions and form contract relationships. In another article, Jensen and Meckling (1976, p. 311) stress the importance of limiting the analogy so that it does not further metaphorically “personify” the organization “by thinking about organizations *as if* they were persons with motivations and intentions” (Jensen & Meckling, 1976, p. 311) but simply adopt the economic analogy that the decisions and transactions of an organization can be modeled “‘as if’ they follow the value maximization rule of a single economic agent” (Fama & Jensen, 1985, p. 101). These twists and turns hide, rather than reveal, the underlying metaphor of economic utility and may be seen to “objectify” and naturalize its premise. The overall consequence is very little reflection within academic circles on images and models of organizations—images that, as in this case, form the basis for much economic thought in both theory and practice.

This is in fact unfortunate, because our theoretical language of organizations is laden with metaphors (Morgan, 2006). Instead of purging them from our theories, it would make more sense to devote our energies toward a more detailed understanding of how metaphors work and toward harnessing their generative potential. Without such reflection, we miss thinking about the fundamental assumptions, or grounds, on which we reason about organizations in our research and explain individual and collective behaviors. It also limits us in our ability to be truly generative by shifting grounds or by inverting the logic of an image into a counterfactual image (Cornelissen & Durand, 2014; Putnam & Boys, 2006). Unfortunately, Morgan’s pioneering work was published

three decades ago and we still do not reap the benefits of a truly reflective approach to our metaphors, applying our metaphors instead in a largely habitual and rote manner (Morgan, 1997).

A direct consequence of this lack of reflection is that to some extent we are out of step with the demands of our times, which need much more complex and dynamic metaphorical images than many of their forebears. Where the contemporary global, digital, and distributed nature of organizations and organizing would require us to produce new images or new assemblages of images, academics, managers, policy makers, and industry analysts seem instead to have returned to old stalwarts such as the machine image (*Economist*, 2015). The machine image is again used for managing large (e.g., Amazon) and small organizations alike, in both manufacturing and high-tech and service sectors. What this dogged persistence of the machine image shows (with hardly anyone questioning its aptness) is something that applies to all metaphors.

In the context of organizations, there is a strong preference not only for concrete images but also for images that emphasize the agency and control of people—as opposed to a more abstract image that is less specific on agency or might even put the control and management of organizations outside of the hands of single individuals. As we know, concreteness is important and is a core basis for metaphors to be considered as apt and useful (Cornelissen & Kafouros, 2007). This is for example why the machine image fares better than more abstract societal images such as corporate citizenship and corporate democracy or sustenance metaphors such as organizational development and growth. In addition to concreteness, another key feature is whether a metaphor puts the individual or individuals using the image in the scenario in the driver's seat, something that is particularly important for managers who want to see themselves (and who want to be seen by others) as being in charge and in control. Managers want to believe they can *leverage* assets, *structure* the organization, and *streamline* its operation to *drive* results (a manager's metaphorical dream scenario). To some extent, this agentic or control aspect of metaphors may be seen to be related to the **embodiment hypothesis** (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), the idea that metaphors with embodied source domains (e.g., human-initiated motor actions or human sense experiences) are preferred over other usually more complex cultural source domains. Even beyond the embodiment hypothesis, the control feature is about having an image that is “human scale” and manipulable, as opposed to abstract and thus beyond immediate comprehension and control. Such control allows people individually and collectively to mentally simulate a scenario in their heads of what organizations are like, and in a way, that makes it “real” and tied to their own being and actions.

To illustrate this a bit more, it is instructive to relate the feature of control to Morgan's image of flux and transformation (based on a metaphor of **complexity science**), and we get an immediate sense of why an image such as that of the machine persists over time, although the idea of flux and transformation is constantly being touted and reintroduced as the next big thing—without ever being widely embraced. (Although who knows? The digital age may create a more fertile ground for the metaphor to finally take hold.) The difficulty here is that the image of flux does not concretely say how individuals fit in the picture. It also offers a very complex causal picture that any one of us struggles with, with organizations being

produced and reproduced as emerging accomplishments out of a complex causal interplay of forces. Certainly, a manager may then simply use a machine image as a much more easily understood and *manageable* proxy. However, although the combination of concreteness and control may provide an explanation for the implicit preference for certain metaphors over others, it should not be seen as a rule or standard for selecting certain metaphors. It simply reveals a bias, or human tendency, that we should recognize and at times make the most of, but one that we should also sometimes challenge or actively circumvent.

In particular, when our times ask for complex and coordinated solutions to grand challenges such as climate change, it arguably does not work to keep debating whether climate change is “man-made” or not. This may not be the right imagery because the issue probably cannot be reduced (in its entirety, at least) to human size. This is probably easier said than done, but being aware and reflective (Morgan, 1986) is already an important first step. The next and following step will be to take up Morgan’s quest for a truly **metaphorical theory (or theorizing) of organization** and reenergize research on how we are able to methodologically or practically metaphorize alternative images of organizations and thus alternative futures.

In the penultimate chapter of his 2006 book, Morgan describes the importance of navigating across alternative metaphors, as ways of seeing and knowing, and to become reflective and skilled in the use of metaphor: to find ways of conceptualizing, understanding, and shaping the situations that we want to organize and manage (Chapter 10 in Morgan, 2006). As he writes:

As we gain comfort in using the implications of different metaphors . . . , we quickly learn that the insights of one metaphor can help us overcome the limitations of another. This, in turn, encourages us to recognize and, indeed, search for the limitations of existing insights: so that we can use them as springboard for new insight. (Morgan, 2006, p. 342)

In other words, Morgan (2006) suggests that the way forward is in reflection and learning, with all of us studying, managing or working in, or otherwise interacting with organizations, being mindful of the assumptions that we are working from and approaching the same organization, or at least our understanding of that organization, in different ways. He primarily uses the **metaphor of “reading”** (Chapter 11 in Morgan, 2006,) to describe this process, which he feels captures how through an attitude of learning, we come to reflect on our assumptions and open ourselves up to new horizons of understanding. It is a very powerful metaphor, and one that he has since devoted much of his life’s work to—in order to, as I understand it, extend the power of metaphor to foster learning and education.

What is interesting is that Morgan believes in the unleashing power of education, with individuals striving to enhance their understanding by actively working through alternative metaphors. He also seems to believe that this is a progressive process such that through learning, individuals gain a progressively more nuanced and complex understanding of organizations. I also in part subscribe to this reading metaphor and have in actual fact seen evidence for it in classrooms. At the same time, I think that it does not directly address the persistent tendency that I described, in which individuals (mostly outside of a classroom) opt for the most

concrete and controlled image and may thus not be encouraged to push themselves any further in their education and learning. This tendency is real, and we see it all over the place today.

One way to address this tendency is not fostering a lateral approach, but instead, encouraging people to work through and across various metaphors as vantage points. Instead, the solution may be that we advocate an active process in which individuals start with a concrete image but gradually complicate such images by combining ideas into ever bigger assemblies, thus extending their reach beyond the basic image with which they started. The idea is that individuals can build up more complex metaphorical images that as complex systems of thought are in a "molecular" way made up of "atomic" metaphorical parts called **primary metaphors** (Cornelissen & Kafouros, 2008). A primary metaphor is the most basic metaphorical description of a target domain and has a minimal structure. A primary metaphor arises in a very basic and automatic manner through everyday experience by means of conflation, during which cross-domain associations have been formed between a target domain and other domains. **Complex metaphors** are formed from primary ones through further conceptual blending and elaboration—that is, the fitting together of small metaphorical "pieces" into larger wholes (Cornelissen, 2005).

For example, returning to the flux image (Morgan, 2006), seeing "organizations as complex adaptive systems" sees them as having the qualitative properties of complex and chaotic systems such as self-organizing networks sustained by importing energy, co-evolution to the edge of *chaos*, nonlinear interactions within and between organizations, irreversibility, and system evolution based on recombination—a real headache to fathom for any individual, particularly without any preparation. However, the primary metaphorical parts that are combined in this complex metaphor include "actions are self-propelled motions," whereby actions of organizations are metaphorically structured as movements of one's body through space; "relationships are enclosures," which likens interactions between organizations as happening in an enclosed space; "change is motion," which sees change or development as a movement in a direction (down a path) and makes it irreversible; and "organizational landscape as natural systems," which likens the surroundings of an organization to a complex natural system such as weather systems or thermodynamics and leads us to see it as an entity that is subject to natural forces.

When they are broken down in this manner, we can see how such basic, primary metaphors lead to a complex metaphorical image wherein organizations, although "emergent" and "constantly changing," act as bodily "agents" and move in a "path-dependent" way in a "space" or "landscape" that is "chaotic" and "constantly evolving." There is also an evolutionary intention in such moves as they may lead to a better "adaptation" (i.e., a "form" or "configuration" of the organization that "[co]evolved" with the "ecology" of the "changing space" or "landscape"). As illustrated by Carley (2002, p. 214), "through a process of synthetic adaptation, groups and organizations become more than the simple aggregate of the constituent personnel and become complex, computational and adaptive agents in their own right." This final inference is the one that people would arrive at, but they can in effect only get there if they have done the more basic primary metaphorical work beforehand.

As this example illustrates, images of organizations may involve complex metaphorical thought that is made up of smaller metaphorical parts. When combined together, such metaphorical parts may lead to a complex metaphor scene that, although elaborate in detail and inferential capacity, can be easily understood and manipulated by individual scholars, managers, and others interested in understanding organizations (Cornelissen, 2005). Although it involves different primary metaphors, the imagined complex metaphor is often still coherent in terms of underlying metaphoric mappings of agency (i.e., who initiates the action[s]), causality (i.e. relationships between cause and effect), and the position of the act (and its consequences) in time and space. The “organizations as complex adaptive systems” metaphor, for example, involves a coherent image of organizations as agents who direct and initiate actions and move in response to constantly evolving environmental circumstances.

In other words, besides a process of **metaphorical imagination** that laterally works across alternative metaphors (Morgan, 2006), the additional suggestion I have would be to horizontally “scale up” from basic, primary metaphors to more complex constellations that are fit for our times. Both moves together may be particularly powerful to foster imagination and to encourage all of us to work with and embrace more complex and dynamic images of organizations.

Conclusions

I have one final note for those doubters who might still be out there. One may reasonably ask whether the text in this chapter means that the very notion of organization can only be represented and reasoned about in metaphorical terms, and not in literal terms. In other words, can we represent organizations without metaphorical thinking? The answer is hardly. If we consciously make the enormous effort to separate out our metaphorical from nonmetaphorical thought, we probably can do some very minimal and unsophisticated nonmetaphorical reasoning about organizations. However, as scholars, we do not do this, and such reasoning would never capture the full inferential capacity of complex metaphorical thought. The concept of organization can, if pushed, indeed be described and unpacked in literal terms, such as a “collective of people working together.” However, without metaphor, the literal concept of organization is relatively impoverished and has only a minimal “skeletal” structure (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). Metaphor fleshes out the skeleton in a variety of ways and adds **inferential structure**. In fact, so much of the **ontology** and inferential structure of the concept of organization is metaphorical, such that if one somehow managed to eliminate metaphorical thought, the remaining skeletal concept would be so impoverished that none of us could do any substantial reasoning about organizations. Morgan realized this point more than thirty years ago and called for an approach to studying and managing organizations that put metaphor at the center. Although he had a resounding impact on the field in the 1980s, the subject has received far less attention in recent years, and it would make sense to restore metaphor as an important research program in the field.

Key Terms

Cognitive perspective
Comparison model
Complex metaphors
Complexity science
Connectionist images
Discursive approaches
Domain
Embodiment hypothesis
Enact
Framing
Ground
Image
Imagination
Inferential structure
Interact
Language game

Linguistically
Master tropes
Metaphorical
Metaphorical
imagination
Metaphorical theory
Ontology
Philosophical accounts of
metaphor
Primary metaphors
Reading as metaphor
Social physics
Social systems
Source domain
Target domain
Temporal continuity

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