

UNITED WISDOM

Myth, Symbol, and Metaphor: Three Ways of Speaking About Complexity

Traditions and Worldviews

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Epigraph

> *“Metaphor is the application of an alien name by transference”*

Aristotle, Poetics, XXI, 1457b. The opening of the definition in S. H. Butcher's English translation: text.

What this article is about

Someone says, “After that conversation, it felt as though a door opened for me.” Their listener may understand the relief, recall a personal experience, or ask where they can now go. But if the listener starts looking for an invisible door in the brain's workings, the conversation changes genre. An expressive description becomes an explanation of a mechanism. The opposite mistake is possible too: dismissing the image because no actual door exists, and losing an accurate account of an experience along with it. Between credulous literalism and contempt for imagery, a more attentive reading is possible. Myth organizes events into a meaningful story, symbol connects an object with a larger range of meanings, and metaphor transfers relationships between domains. They can work together, but call for different questions. This article explores how these forms help us discuss difficult experiences, where they stop serving understanding, and what conclusions they actually support. Its subject is using language, rather than choosing between imagination and reason.

I. When one expression does three different jobs

It helps to distinguish myth, symbol, and metaphor by their work within a particular utterance. Rigid boxes obstruct understanding here: the same image can participate in all three forms. A door in a picture can symbolize transition. A story about a hero passing through a forbidden door and returning changed has a mythical organization. The expression about a door opening after a conversation transfers a spatial relationship to a new possibility. That is metaphor. A shared object does not make the ways of substantiating these forms identical.

Imagine a hypothetical family scene. An old cup is described as a reminder of a grandmother; people recount how it survived house moves and say the cup “brought the family together.” That last expression does not require believing porcelain acts on its own. The cup's story can support the family's sense of resilience, while the object signifies belonging. Yet the actual event, the remembrance ritual, and the assessment of family history remain different layers.

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We can recognize the cup's importance and check the date of a move; respect memory and question whether the family was always close.

Reading begins with a simple question: what exactly are we being asked to accept? A factual account, a way of seeing a connection, a rule of conduct, or a sacred story? The answer changes the next check. A date requires a document. A metaphor requires an explanation of what transfers and what gets lost. A symbol requires knowledge of context. A religious myth calls for attention to its place in a tradition and how participants understand it.

This discipline does not deprive speech of depth. It allows depth to remain open to examination. “That is symbolic” sometimes expresses precise recognition, sometimes a convenient refusal to explain the connection. The difference emerges when someone can show what became clearer through the image. If no distinction appeared, expressiveness still offers only a promise.

II. Myth gives time a direction

Here myth means a culturally significant story organizing origins, order, trials, or destiny. This is a working definition, rather than a universal formula for every religion. In everyday language, myth often means a mistaken belief; here a particular assertion's reliability is discussed separately from the story's arrangement. A story can matter to a community while containing propositions that ordinary historical methods cannot verify.

In Plato's Phaedrus, the story of Theuth and Thamus, 274c–275b, introduces a dispute about writing. The inventor sees an aid to memory; the ruler fears external signs will replace inward knowledge. The plot makes this difference tangible, but does not by itself establish that writing always damages memory. The story poses a question; answering would require separate research. Its distribution of roles also matters: an invention's creator does not turn out to be the best judge of all its consequences.

Contemporary success stories also give time a direction. Someone is offered a path: misunderstanding, crisis, discovery of a calling, victory. They may recognize part of their biography in it. Trouble begins when this form becomes compulsory. Long work without a dramatic turning point starts seeming deficient, and returning to an old activity becomes defeat. From a varied life, only what serves the predetermined ending is selected.

Mythical organization becomes particularly visible through what its storyteller permits. Is there room for chance, help from others, unfinished outcomes? Can a worthy person fail? If every counterexample is explained by a hero's hidden inadequacy, the story becomes an instrument of blame. It stops helping make sense of experience and decides beforehand what experience must be. A useful story permits encounters with what does not fit, and sometimes changes

afterward. That openness distinguishes an orientation from a script people are forbidden to leave.

III. A symbol needs people who know how to read it

A symbol does not carry one meaning independently of use. A ring may be jewelry, a marriage sign, a family heirloom, or part of a religious ceremony. The material is the same; the relationships differ. History, habit, agreement, ritual, and personal experience sustain meaning. Physical composition cannot explain it completely, yet it cannot simply be called arbitrary: participants often have precise requirements for keeping and using a symbol.

Durkheim, book I, chapter I, approaches sacred things through special treatment and rules separating them from ordinary handling. His sociological framework reveals meaning's social aspect. It neither establishes nor refutes the religious truth of an object of faith. A narrower observation suffices here: an object's meaning often appears in what is permitted around it, what is forbidden, and who may determine the arrangements.

Consider a hypothetical visitor photographing a family memorial as an attractive composition. The host sees the photograph as a violation, although the objects remain undamaged. The disagreement concerns how memory is treated. Asking what the memorial is made of will not resolve it. We need questions about permission, the photograph's audience, and what public exposure means. Conversely, an object's personal value does not automatically grant the right to demand the same feeling from everyone. Understanding context and accepting a belief are separate.

A symbol can also connect people who understand it differently. Some see a family celebration as a religious event, others as remembrance, others as a chance to meet. Being together does not require replacing these differences with imaginary agreement. Sometimes agreed actions suffice: refrain from ridiculing another's ritual, avoid forcing participation, explain the arrangements to a guest. A symbol retains depth when it clarifies relationships. It loses depth when used as a loyalty test whose rules were never communicated to the participant.

Disagreement about a symbol can concern the right to display it rather than feelings. Imagine a hypothetical exhibition of family photographs. One relative wants to tell the shared story; another does not consent to publication of their image. One sees a sign of closeness, the other a breach of privacy. The photograph's meaning does not automatically settle this dispute. Permission, awareness of the audience, and an option that does not make participation obligatory are needed. The symbol reveals conflicting meanings, but grants its interpreter no right to control people.

Several possible readings do not mean every reading is admissible. If a symbol belongs to a particular ritual, knowledge of that ritual limits an observer's imagination. If it belongs to a

personal story, the participant's explanation becomes the first ground. An outside interpretation can add perspective while retaining its own status. A reader can say, “I see a transition here,” without claiming to have discovered the author's true intention. This modesty does not reduce expressiveness; it leaves room for an encounter where a reply clarifies meaning rather than one glance appropriating it.

IV. Metaphor reveals relationships and hides differences

Metaphor offers a view of one domain through another. In chapter XXI of Aristotle's Poetics, transferring a name is described in several ways, including analogy. For everyday reading, asking which relationship transfers is particularly useful. “The argument rests on a weak support” concerns a conclusion's dependence on its grounds. A load-bearing structure reveals logical vulnerability. But an argument does not fall through gravity, and checking its premise is not testing concrete.

A useful metaphor therefore has a working boundary. Calling an organization a family can emphasize lasting participation and care. But the family image can quietly justify missing formal agreements, unequal work, and demands for endless gratitude. “Which obligations have been established?” restores what the emotional image left in shadow. Someone leaving a job benefits more from knowing the contract's terms than proving love for a metaphorical family.

Metaphors compete. A problem can be presented as a wall, a knot, or a fork in the road. A wall directs attention toward effort and overcoming. A knot suggests sequence and patience. A fork suggests choosing between consequences. These descriptions are not interchangeable, although they concern one experience. Changing the image lets us consider which actions become visible. This is an author's way of reasoning, rather than an established psychological treatment method.

Distinguishing metaphor from model is especially important. A model needs clearly defined elements, relationships, and testing conditions. Sometimes metaphor helps build it, but expressiveness does not yet ensure accurate prediction. “Consciousness is an ocean” may convey experiential change or apparent depth. Developing a scientific hypothesis from it requires naming observable quantities and an outcome that would contradict it. Until then, the image remains an image. It can be beautiful and useful without borrowing another status.

V. An image influences the question without controlling every answer

Metaphor's influence on reasoning can be investigated, and findings warrant a more careful conclusion than “language entirely creates reality.” In Paul Thibodeau and Lera Boroditsky's 2011 study, participants read about a fictional city's crime presented through different images. Several experiments found differences in proposed measures and choices of subsequent information. This is evidence about specific tasks and groups, rather than a law concerning every person in every situation.

Gerard Steen, W. Gudrun Reijnierse, and Christian Burgers did not find the same overall effect in their 2014 study's four experiments under altered conditions. They questioned the boundaries of metaphor's influence: initial beliefs, text arrangement, and reading purpose. Divergence does not require declaring imagery powerless. It requires abandoning automatic effects: presentation, context, and what the participant already thinks matter.

Practical caution follows. When a manager calls the market a battlefield, we cannot confidently diagnose future decisions from one word. We can notice which questions the image invites. Who is the enemy? What counts as victory? Which losses are acceptable? If cooperation and long relationships disappear from discussion, restore them explicitly. We are examining the conversation's course, rather than an assumed hidden program in the brain.

The same caution helps with ourselves. “I'm stuck” sometimes accurately describes the absence of an available step, and sometimes obscures existing options. Replacing it with an upbeat slogan is unnecessary. We can ask: in which activity, at which stage, because of which limitation? The image becomes the beginning of inquiry. Useful clarification respects the original experience and adds distinctions instead of declaring the experience wrong. Afterward the metaphor can be kept, changed, or temporarily set aside.

VI. A parable invites participation in understanding

A parable resembles mythical narrative and metaphor without completely coinciding with either. The transition from the depicted case to the listener's question matters. In Mark 4:1–20, the sower's story is accompanied by explanations of different ways of receiving the word. The agricultural scene works within a specific religious teaching. Turning it into contemporary learning theory without further grounds would change its status.

Still, a reader can notice the form: the same address does not have the same continuation. A contemporary conversation analogy invites questions about attention, interference, and sustained participation. This is our interpretive work, rather than a claim that the evangelist studied present educational systems. The boundary makes comparison more substantive: we

see a shared relationship and different purposes. Religious salvation is not reducible to efficient information acquisition.

A parable draws strength from open space. It does not always deliver meaning through a ready definition; listeners discover their own position among possible roles. This also makes parables easy to abuse. Someone hears about an ungrateful pupil and is led to think disagreeing with a teacher proves spiritual immaturity. The actual objection can no longer be examined: the story has assigned moral judgments in advance. Such a story becomes a closed court.

A more honest use of parable allows someone to say: this image clarifies one aspect without describing my whole case. Listeners need not select the role offered to them. We can discuss which conditions must coincide for a transfer to fit and what counterexample limits it. The story then supports thinking together. It acquires no authority over someone's biography merely by coming from a respected tradition or being spoken beautifully. Respect for the source includes attention to its actual meaning, rather than limitless expansion of its application.

VII. Similar images do not prove a single teaching

Similar images reveal an opportunity for comparison without establishing a shared answer. Paths, light, awakening, and return occur in different texts because they are capacious forms of human experience. Shared words alone cannot establish historical borrowing, one metaphysical mechanism, or agreement on the ultimate goal. For comparison to become inquiry, both contexts and a precise question are needed.

In chapter XXVI of Zhuangzi in James Legge's translation, words are compared to means of grasping meaning. The image invites us not to get stuck in a verbal shell. Plato's dispute about writing also distinguishes external inscription from knowledge. Their similarity concerns the insufficiency of a finished expression. The difference matters: the texts belong to different philosophical projects, use different conversational forms, and understand the route to understanding differently. Reducing them to “words mean nothing” would lose both.

An image may also be shared while evaluations oppose each other. For one speaker, orderly ritual embodies attention and respect; another sees an immobile form. Resolving the dispute requires no secret unity canceling disagreement. We can investigate where form supports participation and where it replaces it. Comparison returns to conditions, rather than the victory of one attractive formula.

Intercultural reading requires symmetry. We cannot explain a favorite tradition closely while leaving another as a collection of convenient words. We cannot select only what confirms a contemporary belief and hide an inconvenient part of a text's purpose. Respect appears in preserving difference after finding similarity. The shared point is more modest but firmer:

different languages can help pose related questions without promising identical answers or depriving readers of the right to understand why answers diverge.

A useful way to check a shared point is to follow the similarity with one question the sources would answer differently. If no difference can even be formulated, the comparison may be too general. Both texts, for example, may discuss language's limits yet differ on the route remaining beyond them. One seeks definition and consecutive argument; another changes perspective through a story. Specific passages are needed to determine how this works. A preannounced “wisdom of East and West” does not replace such reading.

Another way is returning the image to its original situation. If a contemporary reader uses an ancient journey story to choose a profession, name this new task. It becomes clear which part of the relationship transfers and which does not participate. A religious narrative's hero may fulfill a destiny defined by its teaching; a contemporary person chooses between offers and personal interests. The directional analogy helps, but choice conditions differ. Difference protects the reader's freedom: inspiration can remain without making the entire story a command about one's biography, timetable for change, and sole acceptable outcome.

VIII. Myth can justify power

A cultural story can distribute the right to speak and act. If a group presents itself as the sole guardian of truth, disagreement easily becomes betrayal and a leader's mistake a loyalty trial. The story supplies rules for the present alongside meaning for the past. Examining myth therefore includes asking whom it gives a voice, who bears the cost, and whether its application can be challenged.

Imagine a hypothetical workshop founded by someone who once worked without rest. That dedication became a shared legend. A new generation of employees tries discussing schedules but hears, “The founder never counted the hours.” The biographical detail may be true without justifying current arrangements. A founder's voluntary choice differs from an employee's obligation. A story inspires until it turns one experience into a universal measure of worth.

Symbols of power work similarly. An award, a special chair, a closed door can recall function and responsibility. They can also obstruct objections if an office's sign becomes proof of being right. Conversation reveals the substitution: instead of answering an argument, someone presents affiliation, rank, or the tradition's age. Respect for a role can coexist with examination of a particular decision.

Exposing other people's myths is insufficient here. Our own circles also need stories supporting their exceptional status. It is particularly convenient to regard ourselves as already free from symbolic dependence. Every other attachment then looks naive while our obligations

seem pure reason. Attentive reading begins closer: which story do I use to avoid explaining my decision? Whose objection seems inadmissible before I know its content? These questions restore examination where belief has become part of identity.

IX. Keep the image and clarify the assertion

Examining figurative language does not require translating everything into dry prose. A metaphor sometimes conveys a nuance that a long definition only blurs. Someone who has experienced a difficult conversation may say “I'm no longer standing before a closed door” more accurately than listing ten emotional changes. Clarification should help them, rather than become an examination in correct speech.

It helps to separate three layers temporarily. First is experience: what someone noticed in themselves and the situation. Second is the image: how they express it. Third is the proposed conclusion: what is now considered possible or true. Relief after a conversation, for example, is an experience. The door is metaphor. Confidence that the conflict is finally resolved is a separate conclusion. Check it against what participants agreed to do. This does not cancel relief even if the resolution remains partial.

The distinction particularly matters in spiritual conversations. A sense of unity can truthfully report someone's experience. It need not confirm that all philosophical differences have vanished or another participant now agrees with the conclusion. Precise description preserves experiential value without giving it authority over everyone else. A listener can pay close attention without subscribing to another's cosmology.

The reverse also helps: an abstract proposition sometimes needs an image to make its boundary tangible. “Responsibility for a limited area” can come alive through tending a garden: we cannot control the weather, but can check soil and watering. This author's metaphor distinguishes participation from omnipotence. Actual gardening does not prove the ethical proposition. We use comparison while it clarifies a relationship; argument, observation, and agreement perform the further work.

X. Understanding appears in the next distinction

Understanding a symbolic text need not mean finding one hidden decoding. Sometimes understanding appears through the ability to ask a more precise question. After a transition story, someone distinguishes personal desire from others' expectations. After a parable, they notice verbal agreement differs from lasting participation. After a struggle metaphor, they see options the struggle excluded. These results are small, but more accessible to examination than a declaration of fully revealed truth.

A text can also leave tension, and that is not always a defect. If a story reveals conflict between loyalty and freedom, an immediate solution may impoverish the question. Yet fruitful uncertainty differs from obscurity. Readers can name what became harder, which grounds collided, and what they do not yet know. Obscurity offers only a feeling of depth, without letting us reconstruct the question or the answer's boundary.

Return to the opened door. Neither proving its physical existence nor banning the image is now necessary. Ask which possibility someone noticed: saying something important, requesting time, refusing an obligation, proposing different arrangements. If that possibility still requires another person's consent, this belongs in the picture. The image remains, with an action and condition alongside it. The conversation can continue.

Myth, symbol, and metaphor matter because they connect thought with experience, memory, and imagination. Mature use includes the right to revise a story, clarify an object's meaning, and stop a transfer where it begins distorting its subject. The more an image matters to someone, the more carefully its limits deserve handling. Care does not mean unconditional agreement. It means giving meaning enough space to work and enough clarity to prevent someone becoming captive to their own expressive formula.

What this means in practice

Take one figurative phrase regularly accompanying a decision: “I must follow this path,” “our project is a family,” “everything runs into a wall.” Avoid starting with the most painful subject. Begin with a limited everyday question where clarification does not require exposing another's personal history. Write what the phrase reveals, then what it leaves invisible. A family offers care without canceling an employment contract; a path offers direction while a changed goal may be permissible; a wall offers resistance while the obstacle may be missing information.

Formulate one literal assertion beside it. Who said what, which action is available, which condition obstructs it? This note neither replaces experience nor claims a complete picture. It creates a place for checking facts. If the image comes from a religious text, identify the work and read a neighboring passage: does the meaning belong to the source itself or a later interpretation? Both layers can be interesting when kept distinct.

Try a second metaphor and compare available actions. Treat this as a language experiment, rather than a demand to change a feeling. If nothing changes, that is also a result: the limitation may lie in resources or actual conditions rather than description. If another option appears, name a small step and how you will judge its usefulness. Instead of promising to “tear down the wall,” obtain missing information or clarify an agreement.

In conversation, permission matters more than an impressive interpretation. Ask whether the proposed image helps the other person. Avoid declaring you understand their life's hidden

meaning from a favorite symbol. The opened door belongs first to the person speaking of it. An attentive listener helps consider where it leads and whether it is possible to go there now, preserving the speaker's right to keep the image, change it, or speak differently altogether.

Key quotation

> *"Words are employed to convey ideas; but when the ideas are apprehended, men forget the words."*

Zhuangzi, chapter XXVI, conclusion of §11, James Legge's translation, 1891, p. 141: text. This concerns a means of understanding; it is not permission to disregard the precision of what is said.

Connections between traditions

Comparison	Similarity	Boundary
Aristotle, Poetics, XXI ↔ door image	A transferred relationship expresses something new through something familiar.	A rhetorical relationship does not establish a physical mechanism.
Plato, Phaedrus, 274c–275e ↔ Zhuangzi, XXVI	A sign does not exhaust understanding.	Philosophical tasks and conceptions of knowledge differ; no single teaching is asserted.
Mark 4:1–20 ↔ contemporary learning scene	A story supports discussing different kinds of participation.	The Gospel parable has a religious purpose; the learning analogy is our interpretation.
Durkheim, I.I ↔ family heirloom	Particular treatment makes meaning visible.	Personal remembrance does not automatically equal religious sacred status.
Thibodeau and Boroditsky 2011 ↔ Steen and colleagues 2014	Both projects study metaphorical task framing.	Findings diverge; context and design prevent asserting a universal effect.

Primary sources and research

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Tags

myth, symbol, metaphor, language, meaning, narrative, parable, analogy, interpretation, Aristotle, Plato, Zhuangzi, Durkheim, ritual, memory, tradition, context, imagination, argument, fact, religion, cultural story, power, identity, intercultural comparison, understanding, inference limits, framing, reading, everyday decision.

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