

UNITED WISDOM

Analogy as a tool and a source of error

World and Consciousness

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Epigraph

> *“All our reasonings concerning matter of fact are founded on a species of Analogy”*

David Hume, An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, IX, §82. Opening fragment of a sentence in the English original. Hume is presenting his account of inference from experience, rather than an established universal thinking technique.

What this article is about

Calling something unfamiliar by a familiar name gives a conversation a starting point. A team resembles an orchestra; learning resembles gardening; a difficult conversation becomes a bridge to cross. These comparisons can reveal a connection that is hard to express directly. They can also import rules: an orchestra needs a conductor, a gardener controls the plants, and a bridge leads to the opposite bank. Those rules may not fit the people or circumstances under discussion. This article treats analogy as a limited transfer of relationships: what is being compared, what conclusion is proposed, and where does the transfer cease to work? We consider Aristotle’s account of metaphor, Hume’s discussion of analogy, and the Gospel parable of the lost sheep, retaining their different purposes. An invented group preparing a shared room will help us distinguish an image of coordination from an unsupported demand for obedience. The practical aim is to obtain a question to investigate, while keeping a vivid image from making our decisions for us.

I. What moves from one case to another

A group of neighbours plans to prepare a room for shared gatherings. One person can estimate costs, another can paint, and a third arranges delivery of the materials. Their tasks depend on one another: a surface must be prepared before its coating is applied, and buying everything without knowing the dimensions would be risky. Someone says, “We’re like an orchestra; everyone plays their own part.” In this invented example, the analogy initially does something quite specific. It highlights the relationship between different contributions and a shared result. The group can discuss that relationship without accepting the entire organisation of an orchestra. They need not become a musical ensemble to recognise the need for coordination.

To examine the comparison, name both sides. The familiar case is a joint musical performance; the case being discussed is the preparation of a room. The proposed relationship is that individual actions must take other people’s actions into account. If that is the point, questions

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become concrete. Which tasks must precede others? Who reports a delay? Where is a joint decision needed? Similarities between sounds, professions, or tools have little relevance here. The analogy works through the relationship selected, rather than through a general impression of resemblance. Naming it reduces ambiguity: people may understand a memorable phrase very differently, even when they all agree with it at the first meeting.

Ask immediately what conclusion is meant to travel with that relationship. “We need to coordinate the sequence” differs from “We need someone whose decisions cannot be challenged.” One concerns dependencies between tasks; the other concerns authority. An image of joint performance does not automatically establish the second claim. Its proponent must separately explain the grounds, scope, and conditions of that authority. This is an original way of examining a comparison, rather than a reconstruction of an ancient thinker’s rule. It lets us retain a useful part of the image while rejecting an unsupported addition. Partial agreement with an analogy does not amount to agreement with all the consequences someone attaches to it.

II. Similar relationships do not make objects identical

In chapter XXI of the Poetics, Aristotle includes transfer by analogy in his account of metaphor, explaining it through proportion: the relationship of a second term to a first is compared with that of a fourth to a third. His example relates evening to the day as old age relates to life, allowing old age to be called the evening of life. The passage concerns poetic language, rather than the evaluation of a present-day management decision. Its limited contribution here is a precise suggestion: we can attend to a relationship between things without claiming that the things are identical. This leaves room for difference as well as expression.

Returning to the neighbours, we can compare “my task in relation to our shared project” with “my part in relation to the performance.” Yet the shared project does not necessarily have a score already written. The participants are still discussing what the room is for, how much money they can spend, and who may use the result. These questions may disappear from the musical image, although they matter to the project. Even a structural resemblance transfers only a selected part of a structure. Naming that part prevents the word “orchestra” from silently answering unresolved questions about purposes, ownership, and participation. It also reveals where a fresh agreement or explanation is required.

There is no need for specialised terminology in an ordinary conversation: “Our activities resemble one another in being interdependent; our rights and duties do not follow from that comparison.” This does not diminish the image. It tells people how to use it. The analogy becomes an invitation to consider a particular relationship, which can be refined or rejected. Clarification may remove some of its brilliance while preserving its usefulness. It may instead reveal that the resemblance concerned a mood: the speaker wanted to express togetherness,

rather than explain the sequence of work. An image can serve that purpose too, provided a feeling of unity is not presented as grounds for deciding who must direct everyone else.

III. Explanation, suggestion, and proof

One comparison can perform several jobs, but those jobs call for different responses. An explanation makes an already supported relationship easier to understand. If the work sequence has been established from the materials and the room’s condition, an image of instruments entering in order may help people remember it. A suggestion proposes a possibility that remains untested: perhaps short joint discussions would serve the group better than separate, uncoordinated action. That calls for an examination of relevant conditions. Proof requires grounds for the conclusion itself. Familiarity with the musical image cannot provide them. All three roles may appear in one conversation, so we need to distinguish them by the action being proposed.

Suppose a participant says, “Everyone in an orchestra follows the common tempo; we therefore need to meet every evening.” The first part describes the selected image. The second proposes a schedule for people whose circumstances differ. A missing step connects them. Why is an evening meeting necessary? Which information cannot be shared another way? What happens when someone is absent? Must everyone attend the discussion of every task? These questions do not deny the need for coordination. They examine the particular form being proposed. A shared list of dependencies and two meetings at important stages might suffice. A particular issue might genuinely require discussion in person. The task’s actual requirements determine the choice.

This leaves room for initiative without demanding immediate proof of every new idea. Someone can say, “The orchestra image suggested trying a short joint review.” The group can then discuss the trial, its costs, and when to stop it. Trouble arises when a suggestion is presented as an established necessity: “Every real orchestra does this, so refusing will destroy our project.” The comparison now judges participants before the measure itself has been assessed. Restoring its status as a suggestion removes an unwarranted logical demand, although it guarantees neither agreement nor calm. It makes the open part of the proposal visible and identifies what needs to be learned before people can evaluate it.

IV. How familiar is the familiar example?

An analogy usually relies on a case that seems understandable. Apparent familiarity, however, is not knowledge. Participants may know an orchestra only through its appearance on stage: a conductor raises their arms, musicians enter together, and the audience hears a unified work. They may know little about preparation, interpretive choices, professional agreements, or ways of resolving disagreement. Drawing organisational conclusions from that surface picture transfers our imagined account of those relationships. This is a possible weakness of the particular argument, rather than an empirical claim about all listeners. A question to the speaker can establish what they actually know about the aspect of musical work on which their proposal depends.

In section IX, §82 of the Enquiry, Hume connects the strength of analogical inference with resemblance between cases, distinguishing degrees of resemblance. In §§83–85 he discusses animals' experience and habit as a philosophical account, rather than a modern experimental finding. We take a limited question from this passage: what do we know about the original case, and which similarities matter to the result proposed? A long list of attractive common features cannot answer it. An orchestra and the neighbours both have people, schedules, rooms, and expenses. Listing those similarities does not explain what kind of leadership would be justified in this particular project.

If the original example is poorly understood, two honest options remain. We can investigate the relevant part without claiming knowledge of the whole subject. Or we can choose a closer example that people can discuss concretely. Preparing a meal together might make timing and access to a kitchen easier to consider, although it still would not settle questions of authority. Sometimes it is better to set the analogy aside and describe task dependencies directly. That need not show a lack of imagination. It recognises the image's limited job. If understanding it first requires learning another complicated subject, the comparison may add uncertainty instead of reducing it.

V. Which differences can change the conclusion?

Every analogy contains many differences. Musicians hold instruments; the neighbours hold paint rollers. A concert has an audience; decorating a room may not. The existence of differences does not by itself defeat a comparison. Ask whether a particular difference changes the conclusion proposed. A violin's difference from a brush usually matters little to the sequencing of activities. It may matter greatly to a demand for a single interpretation: the group has not yet agreed on its desired result. A useful examination connects the difference with a decision. Otherwise a discussion can become a contest in listing mismatches, without clarifying any dependency that affects the proposed action.

In this imagined project, voluntary participation may be decisive. One person can help for a single day; another provides materials; a third wants a say in the room's intended purpose. The image of professional performance may presuppose agreed roles and shared obligations that do not yet exist here. This does not show that a voluntary group can never need an organiser. It supports a narrower conclusion: the organiser's authority must reflect actual agreements. Occupying the image's empty conductor position cannot settle that question. The difference concerns grounds for authority, so it matters to a leadership proposal even if it has no bearing on the need to compare calendars.

Keep factual disputes separate from questions about what is acceptable. Suppose the group establishes that a common schedule would speed up some tasks. That does not automatically make the workload acceptable to everyone. An analogy may reveal a coordination problem, but it cannot supply consent on an absent participant's behalf. Purposes, obligations, and the possibility of withdrawal need their own discussion. This boundary is an original ethical distinction, rather than a legal assessment of a particular relationship. It prescribes neither equal votes on every decision nor permanent command by one person. It asks people to name the proposed authority, who has agreed to it, and why an appealing comparison alone cannot establish it.

VI. A parable supplies a context for reading

A different form of transfer appears in a Gospel narrative. Luke 15:1–10 begins with publicans and sinners approaching Jesus, while Pharisees and scribes complain about his reception of them. The parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin follow. Finding what was lost occasions shared joy; the passage explicitly connects that joy with a sinner's repentance and heavenly rejoicing. This context matters to its reading. It is a religious narrative responding to the stated complaint, rather than an instruction for managing livestock or calculating the comparative value of people. Removing its stated meaning would change the account we claim to be interpreting.

In a contemporary group, the image of searching for what was lost might bring to mind a participant whose views have ceased to be heard. That response is possible, but it belongs to the reader. It cannot simply be attributed to the Gospel author or declared a direct rule for project management. A group using the image can name its new purpose: "We want to check whether someone has lacked an opportunity to speak." That differs from "This person is the lost sheep, and we know where they need to return." The latter assigns someone a position they have not chosen. A comparison concerning participation grants no authority to choose another person's path or desired belonging.

Such a reading retains two levels. First we try to understand the original text's question and the meaning it states. Then, where appropriate, we propose our own limited comparison. Joining

the levels does not turn the old narrative into a modern method or the new initiative into a religious duty. A participant may welcome attention to an unheard voice while holding a different view of faith or of the group. Another may prefer direct discussion without a parable. People need not overcome that difference to achieve a beautiful shared language. An action can be agreed without everyone adopting the same symbolic explanation, when its nature and the freedom to choose it remain clear.

VII. An image can import an extra role

An error of transfer may become especially visible when an image addresses people. “We are a team,” “we are a family,” and “we are one organism” can express support or interdependence. Each also offers possible continuations: family may suggest intimacy, an organism may suggest a part’s subordination to a whole, and a team may suggest a common direction. Those continuations are not necessarily contained in the initial statement. Rather than disputing an imagined intention, clarify the proposed role: “What do you want me to do differently because of this comparison?” The reply moves the discussion from judging the speaker’s character to examining a particular request and its grounds.

In the room project, “Don’t leave the orchestra halfway through a performance” might request advance notice of changed plans. It might forbid withdrawal when circumstances change. These are substantially different appeals. The image alone cannot show which was intended or establish the limits of an acceptable demand. A participant can clarify the timing, their promise, and how a task could be handed over. They can also decline a humiliating discussion. Examining an analogy imposes no duty to endure pressure for the sake of intellectual precision. Practical clarity sometimes begins with stating a boundary; a detailed discussion of the image can come later, or may not be needed at all.

Avoid inferring hidden motives. An unsuccessful comparison does not prove a wish to manipulate, and a successful one does not prove goodwill. We can assess the request made without establishing someone’s psychological makeup. It is enough to identify an unsupported consequence and the question requiring a separate answer. If the speaker clarifies the image and removes the extra demand, the conversation’s content changes. If the demand remains, it needs direct discussion. Either way, a return to actual agreements matters. Membership in an imagined “family” or a part in an imagined “orchestra” cannot replace information about what a particular person promised or consented to do.

VIII. Several comparisons can reveal a choice

One powerful image can make its selected aspect of a situation seem like the only aspect. Sometimes it helps to place two comparisons alongside one another, highlighting different relationships. Preparing the room may resemble an orchestra in coordination, a workshop in the distribution of skills, and a neighbours' meeting in discussion of a shared purpose. There is no need to choose the most beautiful winner. Each image raises a question about one part: coordination, competence and resources, or participants' voices. Considering them together establishes no proof that the project is sound. It reveals that different tasks cannot all be resolved by a single transfer and one set of roles.

Multiplying images must not become protection against every check. If a schedule proves unsuitable, saying "Now we're a garden, and a garden grows without a timetable" cannot preserve the old demand without explanation. Changing a comparison is legitimate when the claim changes too and the result is acknowledged. What proved wrong? What is now proposed? What information supports the new proposal? Otherwise the new image merely conceals the point at which the old one failed. Replacing the orchestra with a workshop should produce a concrete revision: assigning work by skill, for example, rather than requiring simultaneous attendance. If the action stays the same, ask why a different name was needed.

There is also a limit to comparison itself. A decision requiring exact dimensions, material safety, or costs needs information about the subject. A series of images cannot supply it. At that stage, set metaphors aside and obtain competent advice, an account of the conditions, or a checkable calculation. This article supplies no technical renovation standards and assesses no actual room. It identifies the point at which a reasoning tool must give way to another kind of support. A comparison may formulate a question; answering it requires the appropriate knowledge. Knowing when to change tools matters as much as producing an expressive analogy, because it connects the problem with a suitable means of addressing it.

IX. A check must allow rejection of the transfer

When an analogy proposes a genuine possibility, identify in advance what would require its limitation or rejection. The group tries a short joint review before interdependent tasks. Its hoped-for benefit is stated narrowly: detecting conflicting plans before work begins. Participants can examine whether such issues arose, whether they were resolved, and whether a meeting was a suitable means. This is an original hypothetical example, with no claim of established effectiveness. If meetings concern information that could be shared more easily another way, the arrangement may need to change. An unfavourable result concerns the chosen form of coordination, rather than the participants' moral worth.

Conditions for rejection matter particularly when words can defend the image indefinitely. Every delay can be called a lack of shared melody and every disagreement a wrong note. The analogy then becomes circular, declaring good whatever supports the proposed arrangement and bad whatever obstructs it. A check must be capable of producing a different action. If a decision needs one specialist's information, for instance, a daily general gathering may be unnecessary; if a task can be performed independently, a common tempo may be excessive. These conditions guarantee no impartiality. They reveal whether a proposal permits limits of its own and give participants an intelligible basis for discussing the result.

Rejecting a transfer need not mean abandoning the initiative. The group can retain the shared room while changing its working arrangements, respect joint effort while cancelling an unsuitable schedule, or use the musical image to explain something while excluding it from decisions about authority. These are different levels of revision. Distinguishing them keeps examination from becoming a choice between complete loyalty and destruction of the project. An original analogy may remain beautiful while ceasing to justify a decision. It may disappear from discussion because participants can now describe the relevant dependency directly. In either case, the tool has performed a limited job and can be set aside without losing the project's meaning.

X. Precision preserves the image's freedom

An analogy need not be a dry diagram. It can express hope, joy, fear, or a sense of togetherness. The difficulty lies in turning that expression into a compulsory conclusion. Saying that a shared project sounds like music may describe an experience. Demanding unchallengeable leadership on that basis proposes an arrangement between people. We can hear the statements separately, without choosing between giving up figurative language and giving up examination. An impression remains an impression; an organisational proposal must name its grounds. The requirement here is a logical demand on an argument, rather than a legal definition of anyone's duties or a rule governing every conversational image.

The three readings do not combine into a single ancient technology. Aristotle explains a poetic transfer of names through relationships; Hume discusses inference from experience and its grounds; the Gospel narrative presents joy over repentance within a religious scene. Comparing them reveals different purposes of an image without erasing distinctions between expression, knowledge, and faith. The contemporary examination of the group remains an original construction. Placing familiar texts alongside it grants it no additional authority. Consulting them instead requires a boundary to the borrowing: which question can they help us ask, and which answer must we establish for ourselves in our present circumstances?

An analogy's practical value may be that afterward we can see the subject more clearly without it. The group develops a sequence of tasks, defined roles, and agreed ways to change

plans. “Orchestra” is no longer needed for every decision. Another image may sustain shared joy without allocating rights and duties. This distinction promises neither easy agreement nor freedom from mistakes. It leaves people able to use language deliberately: transferring a selected relationship, examining relevant differences, and declining to accept an entire decision packaged inside an image. A comparison remains an invitation to look. The next step depends on what we actually find and agree upon.

What this means in practice

Choose a comparison already involved in a decision with modest stakes. There is no need to invent an impressive image or examine a sensitive situation. Write down its two sides and one relationship you want to transfer: “Individual activities in a shared project depend on one another.” Separately name the step proposed. If there are several, choose one: compare the sequence, arrange a meeting, or define an organiser’s role. Check whether that step contains a demand the selected relationship does not itself establish. “I agree that we need coordination; authority needs a separate discussion” can preserve this boundary without rejecting the comparison wholesale.

Identify one difference between the cases capable of changing this particular step. A voluntary group may have different periods of availability; a difficult task may require a method still unknown. Ask what you know about the original example and what needs to be checked in the present case. Choose a small way to obtain the missing information and state in advance what result would limit or defeat the transfer. Use a check suitable for the task, rather than a resemblance between feelings. When specialised knowledge is required, the analogy can help formulate the question, after which a different source of support is needed.

Finish with a short note: “I take this relationship from the comparison; I do not transfer these roles; this is the next step; this result would prompt revision.” You may discover that the image only expresses a feeling, or decide to discard it. Both are acceptable outcomes. This exercise is original, non-diagnostic, and promises neither better relationships nor the removal of bias. Do not use it to assign someone a role or compel an argument. If discussion becomes humiliating or introduces a demand that has not been agreed, you can state a boundary and stop examining the image. Its precision is less important than freedom to participate.

Key quotation

> *“Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost.”*

Luke 15:6, part of the speech within the parable, King James Version. Luke 15:1–10 connects the joy with repentance and heavenly rejoicing. Here the quotation invites attentive reading of a religious image, rather than providing a management rule about other people.

Connections between traditions

Comparison	What it helps reveal	Limit of the transfer
Aristotle, Poetics XXI — Hume, Enquiry IX, §82	A relationship can be named separately from the objects compared	Poetic transfer of a name does not establish a factual inference
Aristotle XXI — the original orchestra example	Coordination can be the selected relationship	Describing metaphor creates no authority for an organiser
Hume IX, §§82–85 — examining the project	A resemblance matters in relation to a proposed conclusion	A philosophy of experience does not establish meeting effectiveness
Luke 15:1–10 — original attention to an unheard participant	An image can prompt a question about whom we have overlooked	Repentance and heavenly joy are distinct from inclusion in a project; the contemporary comparison belongs to the reader
The Gospel parable — Aristotle's poetic metaphor	A text's purpose changes how its images should be approached	Religious narrative cannot be reduced to verbal decoration or management theory

Primary sources

1. **Aristotle, Poetics XXI and XXII.** S. H. Butcher's English translation, Internet Classics Archive, selected text. The complete chapters were read: definition of metaphor, proportional transfer, examples, and poetic diction. No Greek collation was performed. The subject is poetics, rather than the contemporary organisation of people.

2. **David Hume, An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding IX, §§82–85.** English original, Project Gutenberg 9662. The continuous selected passage on degrees of analogy, animals' experience, and habit was read. This eighteenth-century philosophical discussion supplies no modern experimental findings; its animal-handling examples are not adopted as recommendations.

3. **The Gospel of Luke 15:1–10.** King James Version, selected passage. The complaint, both parables, and their stated meaning of joy were read. No reading of the whole Gospel or Greek collation is claimed. Management interpretation does not replace the religious context; the Russian quotation is the author's translation through KJV.

Tags

analogy, metaphor, reasoning, proportion, resemblance, difference, transfer, proof, suggestion, explanation, experience, examination, coordination, cooperation, voluntary participation, authority, consent, boundaries, imagery, context, parable, joy, repentance, Aristotle, Hume, Gospel of Luke, poetics, freedom to participate, revision, clarity

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