

***Theology in the Flesh:
How Embodiment and Culture Shape the Way We Think about
Truth, Morality and God***
By J. Sanders (2015)
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Reviewed by Kevin Schilbrack

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In 1999, cognitive linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson published *Philosophy in the Flesh*, the book that inspires John Sanders' new title. Lakoff and Johnson argue that from the time one is born, human beings have bodily experiences of their environments that involve repeated patterns. When one is held, for example, one feels warmth. When one moves towards an object, one traverses space and gets closer to it. When one fills a container, the height of the contents gets higher. From these experiences, one develops distinct prereflective templates of understanding and reasoning that Lakoff and Johnson call image schemas, schemas with labels such as 'source-path-goal', 'centre-periphery' or 'more is up'. And drawing on these schemas, speakers build conceptual metaphors such as a friendly person is 'warm', a relationship is a 'journey', and as something increases, it 'rises'. Metaphors like these shape just about everything one can say about abstract realities like time or life or, as Sanders points out, truth, morality and God. In short, then, cognitive linguistics offers a powerful argument that we should stop saying that thinking is something accomplished by the mind as opposed to the body.

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The idea that thinking about religious and other non-empirical realities recruits from and is only possible given bodily experiences is still under-appreciated. Summarising the work in cognitive linguistics not only of Lakoff and Johnson but also of Barbara Dancygier and Eve Sweetser, Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, and several others, Sanders explains the ways in which meaning is grounded in our sensorimotor experience and then extended via conceptual metaphor, metonymy, radial categories and conceptual blending. Sanders then applies this work to topics in Christian theology. Central to the book is his discussion of metaphors that are ‘conceptual’ in that they do not merely ornament but guide one’s thinking. For example, if one thinks of salvation metaphorically as being like finding a lost coin, then that metaphor brings out the value and the unexpected nature of what one is thinking about, but, unlike the metaphor of a path or ‘the way,’ the coin metaphor does not lead one to conceptualise salvation as a practice of following God (p. 7). And as Christians prefer one metaphor over another, or even one interpretation of a metaphor over another, this can shape their theology profoundly. For example, if one interprets the metaphor that God is a father as implying a nurturant parent, then one tends to see sin as harming others and atonement as restoration to loving relations, whereas if one interprets the metaphor as implying an authoritative parent, then one tends to see sin as breaking rules and atonement as payment for wrongdoing (pp. 146–52).

Although the observation that the Bible is full of metaphors is not new, Sanders points out that coming to terms with the cognitive linguistic position will be difficult for some theologians. In the first place, since different metaphors lead one’s thinking in different directions, one cannot treat the Bible as if it teaches a single idea of sin, atonement or God. As various Christian communities come to prefer one metaphor over another, their thinking moves along divergent tracks, all of which might be legitimately biblical. In the second place, since the meaning of terms always depends on cultural frames, how a statement was understood in antiquity will differ from how it is understood now. For example, biblical literalists today might insist on the propriety of corporeal punishment of children, but they restrict spanking to pre-teens and do not include one’s adult children, as ‘children’ would have been understood in antiquity. They also limit the strokes to just a few instead of the biblical forty, strike the buttocks or hands instead of the back, do not leave marks or bruises despite the biblical injunction to leave welts and do not strike in anger, although parental anger is affirmed in the Bible (pp. 162–5). How the words are understood reflects a shift in how ‘punishment’ is framed by one’s culture. And in the third place, there are rival interpretations of Christian belief and practice not only after the

New Testament but also already in the New Testament. The notion that the answer to the question of how best to live is to follow the Bible shows a lack of understanding both of how meaning works and of the Bible itself.

One of the dangers of the focus on embodiment is that as one realises the extent to which all thinking depends on the body and the ways in which human bodies differ, one will give up the idea of objective truth and embrace some form of body-specific relativism. (An analogous danger arises when one realises the tremendous variety of ways that cultures shape our thinking, which is the other part of Sanders' subtitle.) Sanders wishes to avoid the relativist conclusion and he says clearly that the body-influenced character of human knowledge does not rule out the possibility of objective truth (pp. 24–5). But the book undermines this goal when it claims, repeatedly, that truth depends on one's body or, to use Sanders' adjectives, that truth is 'species-specific' and 'anthropogenic' (p. 11). Chapter 4 is devoted to this claim, but these adjectives hurt his cause. As for 'species-specific', if a statement is true, then its truth does not depend on the kind of body one has (unless the statement is about one's body, of course). A truth is not true only for a specific kind of animal species. For example, statements like 'the civil war in Syria has spawned millions of refugees' and 'human-caused climate change is speeding up' are statements that draw on body-based metaphors and human concepts, but *their truth* is not species-specific. As for 'anthropogenic', Sanders does not unpack this concept, but the idea seems to be that truth is not generated by the extra-human world. Sanders rejects the naïve realist assumption that how one perceives the world is the same way that any creature would perceive the world, and he is right to do so. But one can grant that one's embodied experience and sensorimotor capacities shape human knowledge without claiming that it is human knowing, rather than the world, that generates the truth. Lakoff and Johnson argued that cognitive linguistics requires a realist epistemology in which embodied organisms come to know an environment that exists independent of being known. I endorse this embodied realism, and if one agrees, then one has to reject what philosophers call an epistemic conception of truth that collapses the domain of what is true into the domain of what we know. Even if all human understanding is embodied, what is true – even what is true for humans – does not depend on what human beings understand.

This book is an accurate and accessible introduction to cognitive linguistics and its relevance to theological topics. However, the category of 'embodiment' or 'embodied cognition' names not a single theory but rather a multifaceted research program and, in addition to the cognitive linguistics that Sanders covers so well, this multidisciplinary field includes phenomenology, ecological psychology, artificial intelligence, robotics, and ethol-

ogy – all of which will have implications for theology. These approaches treat cognition as dependent on sensorimotor experience and movement in one's environment, and the philosophical and theological import is enormous. If this view is right and thinking requires a body, then the mind/body dualism assumed by most Christian thought is put in question and it becomes hard to imagine one's personality surviving death. What does a religious or a spiritual life look like if we understand a human person not dualistically as a spirit that happens to be in a body but rather monistically as a necessarily embodied and material being? Some Christian theologians, like Warren Brown and Brad Strawn in *The Physical Nature of Christian Life* (Cambridge, 2012), are exploring this question. This question may only be implicit in *Theology in the Flesh*, but answering it may be the primary theological issue of our age.