

Cognitive Semiotics and On-Line Reading of Religious Texts

A Hermeneutic Model of Sacred Literature and Everyday Revelation

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Abstract: In this essay I propose a hermeneutic model of the higher level understanding during on-line ritual reading by devotees of their respective sacred literatures, using the instruments provided by cognitive sciences. The way a devotee reads a sacred text differs from the way he or she would read a common piece of literature or how a lay person might read the same sacred text. After providing an overview of metaphor, anthropomorphism, and the “religious brain”, I suggest how devotee-readers might make sense of a religious text and why it should be so important for their own personal everyday life. Universals are implicated in this genre of literature and the way it is interpreted.

Keywords: religious literature, cognitive linguistics, metaphor, semiotics, limbic system, attention, memory, higher level thinking, consciousness, empathy, rituals, anthropomorphism, reading, authority, literary universals

Almost everybody has a favorite book or poem. Usually the favorites are the ones that, when you get to the last page, you wish it were just the beginning, the ones that make you notice life in a different way. Some people even say their favorite piece of literature has “changed their life”. Good literature leaves a sense of satisfaction or gives some sort of insight to life and to living.

The type of literature I want to evaluate is different from what we traditionally expect. For the most part, the readers of these texts consider them “sacred”: we are dealing with readers who ritually read sacred texts, and whether revealed through divine means, or supernaturally inspired, there is a difference between reading this sort of literature and reading Shakespeare or Dante for this category of readers. Not only is the text read, but it is sometimes carefully read aloud, chanted, memorized, recited

in its entirety to acquire a deeper meaning, or "chewed and swallowed" bit by bit (Christian *lectio/ruminatio*). Even the paper it is written on and the ink of the text are to be considered holy. The readers approach the reading of these texts with solemn behavior (even by means of ablutions prior to reading), knowing that it has a teaching that neither any other book nor any other teacher may impart, *expecting* it to actually "change their lives." For this reason its interpretation is of vital importance, often considered a matter of (eternal?) life and death – especially for those who misinterpret it.

It seems reasonable to deduce that the readers of these sacred literatures, those people that consider them "authentically sacred," not only behaviorally approach the writings in a different manner, but also universally apply a cognitive process of semantic interpretation which differs from the pleasurable reading of a "worldly" novel. This type of reading is laden with emotional response from the devotee-reader. After having given an overview of the fundamental relationship between certain religious literatures and the readers of the religious systems that consider them sacred, I will take a look at conceptual integration (explicated in Fauconnier & Turner's "Blending Theory") and how it is used during the devotees' on-line interpretation of the text.

Metaphors and Our Everyday World: A Cognitive Linguistics' Perspective

Traditionally metaphor has been considered a linguistic device used to make literature more ornate. Aristotle wrote, "Metaphor is the application to one thing of the name belonging to another" (*Poet.* 21, 1457b). This would be to compare (*anàlogon*) Achilles and lion, and the reader is left to search out the common qualities: Achilles is a lion among men such as lion is a warrior among beasts, and both are strong and brave. The trope is simply a decorative and ornamental phenomenon, linking aesthetic pleasure and communication, easily substituted with a literal paraphrase like "Achilles is strong and brave." Thus Shakespeare - many literary critics would say - dared to compare his beloved to a summer's day and through metaphors we understand how lovely and temperate she really was. From Aristotle to our days, metaphor

has been considered a linguistic device to say one thing in terms of another through substitution simply because the two terms are alike. Yet, why should a lion be considered "brave" when this is distinctively a human quality? And how can a day be "lovely"? Aren't these just further comparisons ("lovely" after all is an adverb meaning "like love")?

Recent psycholinguistic and cognitive research on metaphor has strongly proven that metaphor is a conceptual phenomenon, more governed by thought than by language, and has little to do with special cognitive processes of literal interpretation (see, for example, Gibbs, 1994 and Katz *et al.*, 1998). Starting with *Metaphors We Live By* in 1980, a seminal study of conceptual metaphor, George Lakoff and his colleagues have since then studied and theorized on the fact that metaphors are entrenched in the way we represent ourselves and the world around us. At times they are so entrenched, in fact, that they are considered literal: it is difficult to consider expressions such as, "Oh! I see!" "I'm going to defend my argument," or "The company's growing" as manifestations of conceptual metaphors like KNOWING IS SEEING, AN ARGUMENT IS A WAR, A SOCIAL ORGANISM IS A PLANT. Metaphors are classified then by the degree of conventionality, or how much they are entrenched in our daily lives. Many words we tend to consider literal have metaphorical origins (Sweetser, 1991), and it has been shown how difficult it is to find literal meanings of words. Psycholinguistics has shown that metaphorical phrases are understood in the same manner as literal phrases. It would be honest to say that literal and metaphorical are not to be considered contraries; a word's meaning is "more or less metaphorical." Indeed cognitive linguistics has restored the variety of colors to what was classically considered a black and white trope, clearly distinguished from its literal dichotomous counterpart. The cognitive process behind metaphoric comprehension is not an extraordinary feat for the human mind, nor is it, as Locke said, a "verbal abuse." Literal and metaphoric are gradual points on a semiological spectrum, and not diametrically distinct.

Metaphor is conceptual, and another great claim of cognitive science is that human reason is for the most part metaphorical. The process which construes metaphor is a basic mental capacity by which people understand themselves and the world around them and thus are to be treated as universals. The ability to combine unrelated ideas to express what would otherwise be inexpressible is part of our socio-communicative abilities, acquired along the ages, dating back some 30,000 years ago,

when religion and art were just being invented (Mithen, 1996). The discovery of conceptual integration (see Fauconnier & Turner, 2002) has made it possible to understand how humans create new patterns of thought via mental spaces (conceptual "packets" construed on-line) and how human creativity is essentially a matter of being able to blend partial structure. The emergent structure creatively arises by composing, completing and elaborating the elements and relationships recruited into the blend where new inferences arise.

What occurs in conceptual integration, or "blending," is that we combine two concepts to generate a third. This is what happens with metaphors: we use a more common object to talk about a more abstract object, and what we get out of this combination is a new concept not proper to either of the input spaces. So we speak of the mind in terms of container, saying "I've got an idea in the back of my head", or "he's out of his mind," although we have never seen a box full of ideas, nor have we ever lost the ideas that flow out of our container-mind. Cognitive linguistics has upheld the fact that our language is strongly embodied, and metaphors are not always based on objective pre-existing similarities. "The cognitive linguistic view maintains that – in addition to objective, preexisting similarity – conceptual metaphors are based on a variety of human experience, including correlations in experience, various kinds of nonobjective similarity, biological and cultural roots shared by the two concepts, and possibly others," (Kövecses, 2002: 69). What we see and feel everyday, the experiences we live and how we perceive them will shape much of our language and the way we think about certain ideas, and in this context, we will see how they shape people's relationship with religion, how this relationship changes their personal view of themselves, and for what reasons we need to treat them as literary universals.

Anthropomorphism: God Created in Man's Image

God has been thought of not only in human scale, but using human-like qualities. Divine agency is seen in terms of the most complex object that man knows of, and that is himself, and as anthropologists have noticed, there is little choice (Boyer, 2001: 143). The cognitive system of humans automatically infers many operations to avoid an overload on itself, and it recruits information from all its resources. "[A] lot happens beneath that Cartesian stage, in a mental basement that we can describe only with the tools of cognitive sciences" (*ibid.*, 18). People know a lot about them-

selves, much more than other things in the world, and human beings become the easiest source for information to produce inferences, which is why it seems all so natural to say that a lion is brave. God was created in man's image, and it is an anthropological universal that supernatural beings are considered to have a mind (*ibid.*, 143-144), placing man much closer to the Divine than to the animal on the Great Chain of Beings.

A human-like God is nonetheless, in Justin Barrett's term, "theologically correct" (1999). The devotees of the Eastern or Western religions considered here will say that God has a lot of human-like qualities—and He has even become human, for Christians taking the flesh of Jesus of Nazareth, or for Hindus as an *avatar* like Krishna—yet he is not quite "like" a human. The God presented in the Tanakh or in the Qur'an has a mighty hand, and His eyes see everything, but these are metaphors of His omnipotence and His omniscience. In a way the devotee juggles with two different mental spaces: one is human-God, to which he can relate; the other, which builds on the first, is a supernatural-God, far more different than what he can ever imagine. The Muslims are warned that God is beyond anything one might devise by the way of concept or definition: a concept which is half way between the *via remotionis* and literalists' anthropomorphism (Bausani, 1980: 16-17). Although God has revealed Himself in and through the Holy Word, the religious reader shifts between knowing and not being able to know. The starting point of devotees' understanding of God, despite His infinite qualities, is seeing Him as the perfection of man.

Religious Literature: Differences and Universals

At this point, I want to emphasize that not all religious traditions have a "Book": even though the Greeks, for example, had a very complex pantheon and a very advanced scriptural system, they did not have a book of do's and don'ts. Notwithstanding this fact, I believe that, had there been such a sacred text, ritualistic readings would not have been absent.

With this in mind, I will constrain my object of study to being less general, considering here the texts of the Semitic and the Indian phylogenetic religious systems, with which most Westerners are familiar, and whose literatures have been esteemed within a global view of culture. They have been considered the two major

streams of religious thought (e.g. Zaehner, 1969 and Parrinder, 1964). Because of similar, though not identical, characteristics of the devotee's approach to the sacred texts, particularly relevant to the degree of authority attributed to the text, it is in my opinion possible to create a model of on-line interpretation which could be used with devotional literature of other religious systems, although they are of completely different socio-historical origins. The cognitive factors involved suggests that these practices are statistical, if not absolute, universals.

Phylogenetically Judaism, Christianity and Islam are traceable back to the Semitic story of Abraham. Yet the latter two must not be considered "modifications" of the Jewish tradition: Christianity was not the result of a schism of Judaism, and Islam is not an unorthodox version of Christianity. It is crucial to say that they are not simply "heresies" but religious systems all in all with profound differences. Moreover, within these religious systems there are many other divisions, some of which have over the years become stable orthodoxies, such as Protestantism or Shiitism. Similarly, the Hindus' preoccupation of how to flee from the "*samsara*," the eternal cycle of reincarnation, which was taught in the *Upanishads*, became that of the Buddhists and the Jainists, but whether we consider one as the historical product of the other or fruit of supernatural illumination, common sense can guide us in respecting each one distinctively.

Even a brief survey of the traits that distinguish sacred literature from secular literature not only puts the typology into perspective, but is paramount in discriminating the cognitive activity (e.g. on-line interpretation, embodied self-awareness) of the reader when interpreting the books of the living and the books of Life. Even within religious literature, it is wise to distinguish between sacred literature (the "Bibles" and "Qur'ans") from saintly literature, that is, the wisdom and devotional literature of saints. Objectively the content is not much different, nor the style, nor the language. What makes the canonical literature so "meaningful" to the reader is the emotional content linked to the authority of the text and its meaning. Authorship of these holy texts is considered divine, whether written by hand of God, communicated under dictation or holy inspiration. In any case, the written word is the word of God formalizing His will. The lay reader's approach to the *Qur'an*, the *Bible* or the *Vedas* is entirely different from the devotee's; for the former, the attention will be displaced from

a spiritual meaning, and, like for any other literature, a historical, sociological, anthropological or aesthetic interpretation will emerge, whereas the latter will place his or her attention almost completely on a "revealed" meaning during a spiritual reading.

How is it that sacred literature should have such a long lasting impact on the life of the devoted readers? I suggest it is the ritualistic aspect of the reading activity and the authority of the text, the conceptual integration made between the text and the reader's personal life, and various neurological and emotional processes that make sacred literature so meaningful for the devotee. These issues are certainly present across genetically and areally distinct religious traditions. The question of the *intentio auctoris* and the interpretation of texts have been studied at great length (for example in Eco, 1979), but the nature and the use of sacred texts differs greatly from more common writings. Without focusing on what meaning the author(s) of a sacred text wanted to give it, I will delve into the meaning given by the users of the text to the reading process, considering the universal cognitive factors tied to the course of action and why it is so important to that reader.

"Epistolary Reading": Difficult or Meaningful?

Through the divine literature, God has revealed Himself. The reader considers him or herself as the audience of the Holy Word, and what was rationally a book written centuries before now becomes a personalized letter. This "epistolary reading", as I call it, of the sacred literatures is hardly ever present in other literary readings. Even in the case of an author who may directly address the audience, the reader comprehends that it is all simply a rhetoric device. What is praised as the Eternal Book has a transcendent Being as its author. That book is read as if it were written at that very instant for the reader-devotee. Everything is pertinent, every word and comma (even a pause of silence) has a meaning: it is up to the reader to understand it.

The devotee spends considerably more time in reading and interpreting the sacred literature than what is dedicated to a secular piece of narrative. We may compare the attention given to sacred literature by a devotee in general with that of any common reader of poetry. Poetry in itself usually contains a more difficult and complex linguistic and syntactic structure, thus often necessitating more attention, and

the reader may have an overall sense of satisfaction after having studied the text to seize its "deeper meaning," which may concern the fate of humanity or the pleasures of the world. Further on I will show that one of the main factors in determining the text as important for the reader lies in the value given to its authority.

I believe that during the reading of such an important text for a reader, a strategy of delayed categorization is used. Although the normal reader of a sacred text may delay categorization for fractions of seconds, enough to assess the situation presented, the religiously inclined will further retard his process of categorization, rendering the text more flexible and adapted to his personal-life situations. In certain cases, delayed categorization may frustrate the reader because of "a period of uncertainty that may be quite unpleasant, or even intolerable" (Tsur, 2003: ch. 1) which may be why certain lay readers tend to describe the Bible or the Vedas as "difficult readings."

Cognitive Factors Involved in On-line Ritual Reading of Religious Literature

In interpreting the sacred text, the devotee begins from a semiotic mental space, which is the event of approaching the text. "This signification, or 'semiosis', whether it be an act of communication or of private thinking, is always part of a situation which serves as background" (Brandt and Brandt, 2002: 64). The devotee-reader is like a person who has prepared him or herself psychologically to knock at the door of a benefactor. The reader is opening up a channel of communication with the Divine, in which he or she wishes to learn to compute the divine will or learn the divine teachings. This mental space is where the devotee starts to interpret the text, in that the reader's context will influence his or her reception of the text itself and the allocation of a particular meaning: accordingly this is the base space from which the other spaces will be constructed, and it includes volition, intention, information and action. The way the text will be read heavily depends on the context: the reader is performing a daily prayer (or perhaps is sad and wants to be consoled through the sacred scripture), the place is an open space, very quiet (or either a church with the organ playing in the background, or a private room), he or she has performed a rite before taking to

the reading (an ablution with fresh, running water, or invocation of the Holy Spirit, or some prayer or gesture). While Eco's *The Name of the Rose* may be read anywhere, needing only minimal contextual silence to concentrate on the text, the devotee-reader of the sacred literature will actively and intentionally search for an "appropriate" environment and perhaps will not even look at the text if not prepared psychologically (or spiritually). Roman Catholic and other Christian denominations invoke the Holy Spirit by means of rhythmic and repetitive prayers, Muslims are taught ritual ablution, or physical cleaning, because "ritual pureness is half of the faith [and] light" (*Hadith XXIII*), and Hindus and Jews have similar rites.

These cognitive-behavioral ritual preliminaries can be considered religiously as a purification of oneself to be worthy to receive a divine teaching; what happens from a neuro-physiological point of view is that one enters a state of quiet, slowing down the rate of breathing and of the heart's beating. These ritual preparatory methods have a rhythmic and repetitive quality, such as singing or repeating a mantra or prayer or repetitive bowing, and may continue in the very reading of the text. This repetitive behavior can have consequential effects on the limbic and autonomic nervous systems, driving "cortical rhythms to produce ineffable, intensely pleasurable feelings" (Newberg and D'Aquili, 2001: 88).

The limbic system, which has generally been associated with complex aspects of emotions and includes the hypothalamus and the amygdala, has been elevated to the status of "transmitter to God" by researchers such as Joseph, Persinger, Ramachandran, and Austin, although Newberg and D'Aquili remind that it works with other structures (*ibid.*: 185). The amygdala's primary function, besides being the "sensory gateway to the emotions" (Aggleton and Mishkin, 1986), is to be alert for unexpected movements which may signal danger. Since ritual actions are for the most part made up of distinct, irregular behavior (repetitive bowing, twirling, chanting, keeping one's hands raised in the air, etc.), the amygdala (with the help of the lateral hypothalamus) may be stimulated enough to produce what is a sense of awe (Newberg *et al.*, 2001: 88-9; D'Aquili and Newberg, 1999: 102). This could justify the sense of authority the reader has, perhaps augmented by the ritual aspect of the read-

ing, and be related also to the superior attention allocated to the act of reading the sacred text.

The hypothalamus — in evolutionary terms, the oldest part of the limbic system — controls the autonomic nervous system, thus regulating survival-related body functions like aggression, sex, hunger, thirst, and hormonal systems like the ones relating to reproduction and growth. It has been shown that there is a direct connection between hormones such as vasopressin, which among other functions serves to regulate blood pressure and testosterone, and religious practices like meditation and rituals (Newberg *et al.*, 2001: 44). In general, there may also be a decrease of blood pressure, heart rate, respiration, as we have already mentioned, which are products of the hypothalamic activity and may aid in the immune system function (*ibid*: 86). Moreover, the emotions generated by the hypothalamus tend to be stimulus bound (D'Aquili and Newberg, 1999: 39). Researchers have experimented with chemical stimulation to produce certain emotional effects, but have discovered that the emotional structures of the brain cannot be activated like the way it is when the person is performing a ritual within a cognitive and religious context, triggering "positive psychological states ranging from mildly pleasant sensations to feelings of ecstasy" (Newberg *et al.*, 2001: 88-9). The same effect may occur spontaneously by the stimulation of hypothalamic or limbic structures, perhaps "because of an accumulation of certain life experiences" (D'Aquili and Newberg, 1999: 103).

Andrew Newberg and colleagues (Newberg *et al.*, 2001: 29-31; D'Aquili and Newberg, 1999: 34-37) have studied the prefrontal cortex, the area associated with attention, and its role in generating intention and mediating emotion. Not only are its connections to the limbic system, generally associated with the prompting of emotions, the most intricate and tight of the whole cerebral cortex, but it is also the only area that receives fibers from all of the sensory channels, integrating all the data received through vision, hearing, touch, taste, and smell. It is involved in the structuring of conceptual frameworks because of its synapses with the verbal-conceptual association area in the inferior parietal lobe, assisting the formation of abstract concepts and putting them into words. The prefrontal cortex is set in the frontal lobe, which includes the motor cortex responsible for the movements, often associated

with goal-oriented behavior. Studies on humans have shown that prefrontal damage results in the inability to concentrate on complicated problems and to plan and to orient one's behavior for future tasks. Because of its connections with the limbic system, prefrontal patients have difficulty in emotion modulation, and seem to exhibit apathy. Indeed neurologists consider this to be the seat of the will.

Antonio Damasio has clinically studied the importance of the prefrontal cortex for attention and emotions, synthesis and analytic reasoning, memory and purposeful actions, among other things, and more fundamentally the relationship between emotion and cognition. Prefrontal patients, like in the classical case of Phineas Gage, retain intellectual abilities such as language and calculations but seem to become emotionally flat, socially inappropriate and hyper-rational, not being able to motivate decisions (Damasio, 1994). The lack of temporal organization of information and of concentration, not the lack of memory, impairs free recall in prefrontal patients, in that the information is not blocked or inaccessible, but the patients have difficulty in searching their memories (Miall, 1995). This is important for conceptual integration of the mental spaces construed, as will be discussed.

Mental Spaces and Hermeneutics: The Reader in the Text

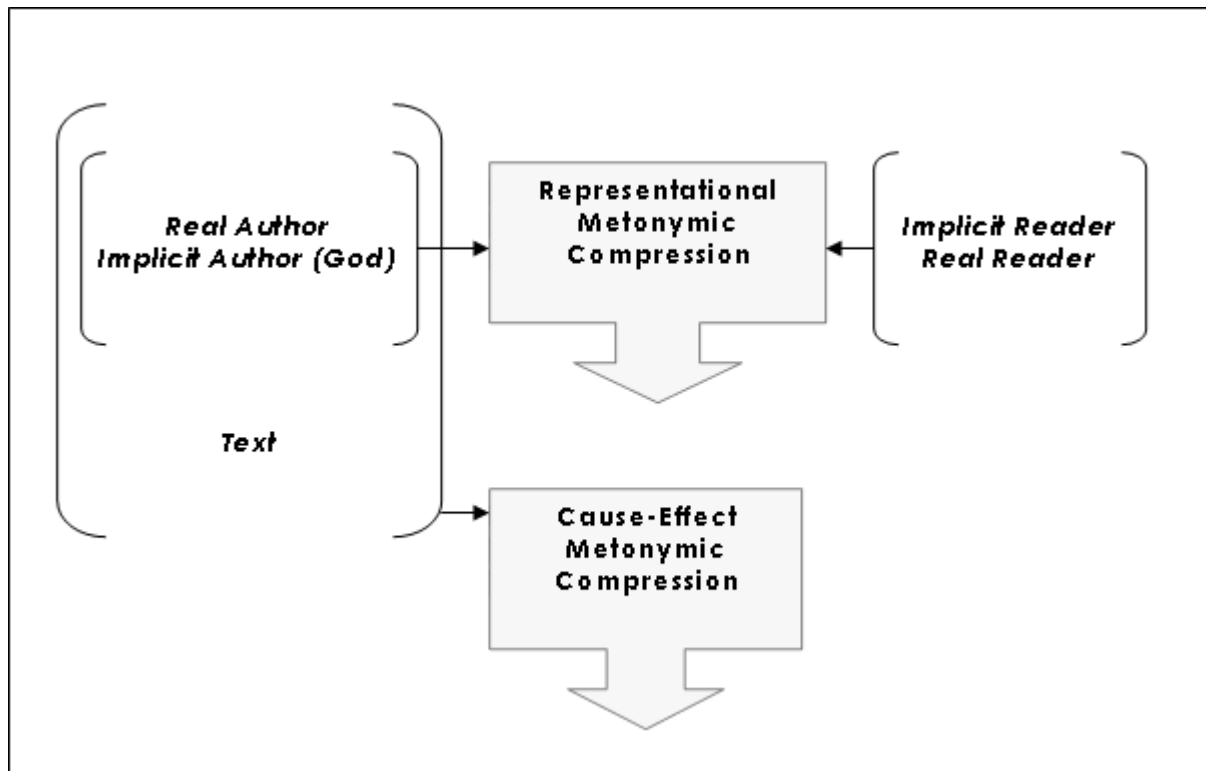
I will now present a hermeneutic model of a passage from sacred literature, and demonstrate how the interpretation performed by the devotee-reader will provide him with a sense of revelation, or personal insight, which will not normally emerge in a lay-reader. It is because of the authority given to the text (as has been mentioned and will be expounded further) and the cognitive aspects implicated during ritual actions that the text becomes so important to the reader. There is a myriad of factors involved, ranging from cognitive to social, but it may be simplified by breaking down the process into the mental spaces drawn in during the process, keeping in mind the complexity of the "religious brain".

One teaching that has been summoned for its universality is the Golden Rule, a principle of ethics. The moral of this teaching is that everyone must do (or not do) what one wishes to have done (or not done) to himself or herself. I have chosen to

apply this teaching to the current model for various reasons. One reason is for its brevity, which is convenient for this paper because of the density of the subject matter. Moreover, often only a few phrases (perhaps longer than the one analyzed here) are chosen to be read for meditation by the devotee-reader: here we will use the Christian version of the Golden Rule, taken from the New Testament, however the teaching (and the wording) is essentially identical to that of other religions and faiths. Another reason I have chosen the Golden Rule is because it does not necessitate particular background knowledge of any particular religious system, in that it can be considered a general ethical principle, not necessarily tied to any one culture, a literary universal in itself. It can be used for a basic model, despite its profoundness.

The Golden Rule proposes a situation that may or may not be present in the life of the reader-devotee, as is typical of the teachings of sacred literatures, that is, presenting life situations which are generic and possible, guiding the faithful towards attitudes and actions considered orthodox to that religious system. The universal nature of these "teachings" is not in the subjects, but in the interpretation. In certain texts, the intention of the author was not to spiritually guide or educate (for example, the *Song of Songs* was originally a nuptial poem and then was used to explain what is often referred to as *unio mystica*). Even historical or mythological stories are generalized, by means of the SPECIFIC IS GENERAL metaphor. The *Bhagavad Gita* story of Arjuna, for example, who is ultimately convinced by Krishna to fulfill his obligations of *dharma*, has been "revealed" ultimately as the story of a struggle between good and evil, between what is naturally pleasing and what is supernaturally gratifying.

A great deal of attention is placed on the text, and the devotee considers it authoritative, and we have already explored what might be taking place neuro-cognitively. The authority and the respect given to the text is because of conceptual compression. The text's real author and its implied author (the Divinity) are metonymically compressed by means of a representational relationship, for example, in the case of inspired literature, and the text with its author(s) by means of a cause-effect relationship. Likewise, the implied reader metonymically becomes the real reader, notwithstanding the fact that the text was written centuries before (fig. 1).



The specific text, thus, presents a new mental space which contains a particular situation or story, in our case the Golden Rule. This presentation space is influenced by the base space mentioned in the previous section, and it is distinctly figurative: the written text has many "slots" which will be filled by the reader. The passage to be read is sometimes predetermined, when it is prescribed by some religious authority, as is the case with Muslims' *salat* or Roman Catholics' *Liturgy of the Hours*. A meaningful interpretation of the text in the case of predetermination obviously enhances the mystical experience of the devotee, who *a priori* feels as if it is pointing towards him.

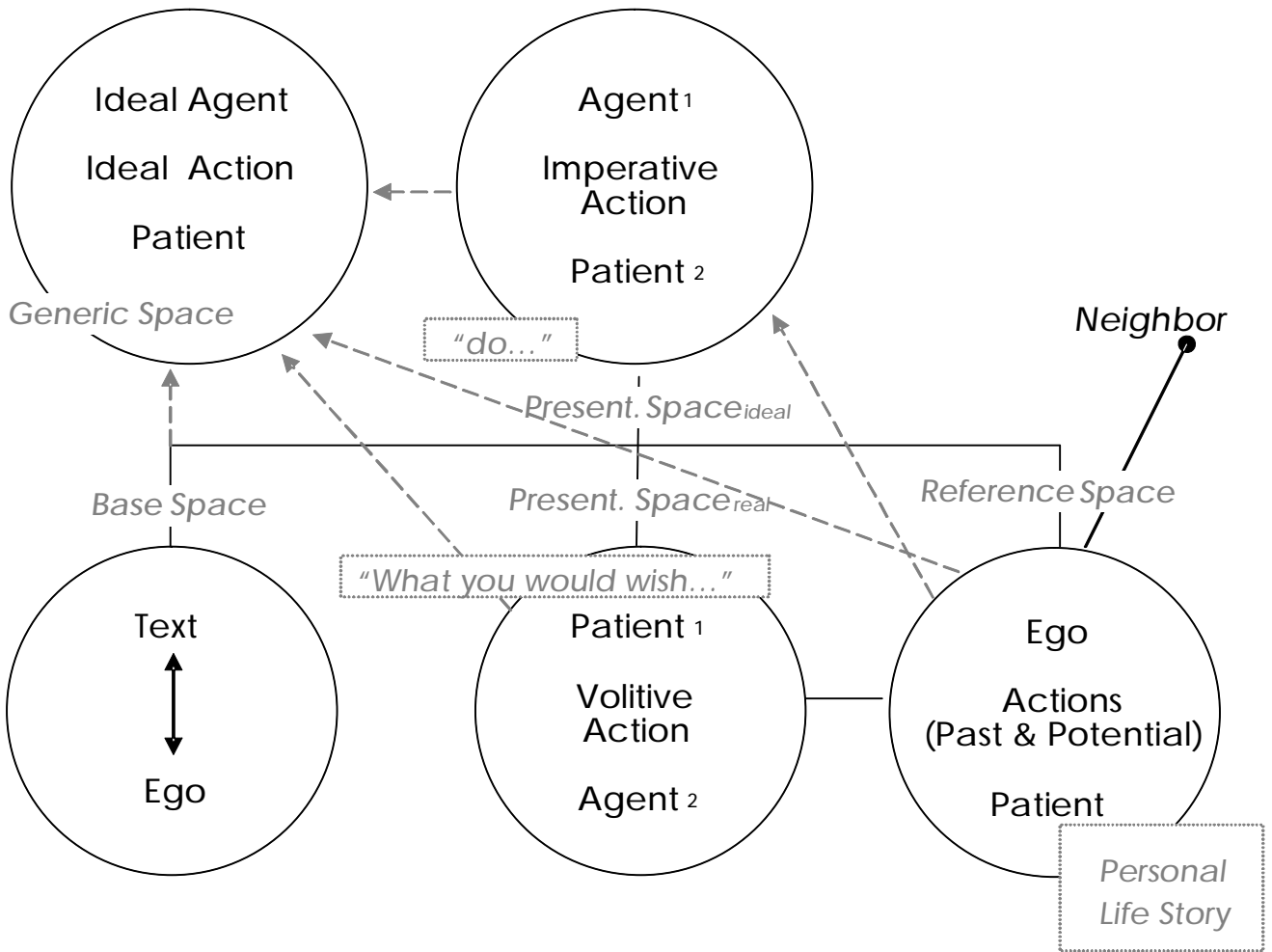
The text is carefully read to comprehend the words and the syntax. The devotee wants to be able to understand every single word, often recognizing references to people and places, and strives to avoid ambiguities. In the study of devotional literature, there are often references to other sacred texts, allusions that work off of precedingly established meanings. These types of allusions are a literary universal (Hogan, 1997: 227).¹ The text in and of itself helps construct a new space in which the text is presented. For the devotee, God is mystically speaking to him *hic et nunc* via the

¹ See also the Literary Universals Project (LitUP) at <http://litup.unipa.it>.

divine scripture. Only the reader can interpret what it means for him when God tells him, "Do to others what you would wish them do to you," and it all depends on his life situation in that moment. It is God communicating to him, and as in every communicative act, the listener spares no effort in understanding what the speaker wants to say. The interpretation of sacred literatures requires an active intelligent act on behalf of the devotee, which the religious leaders warn as not always being simple. His or her interpretation will be based on what background knowledge there is of that text, but it must always be meaningful, because it is given by a divine author(ity) to the devotee. It is up to the reader to be able to find a meaningful interpretation, although with increased knowledge it may differ, but nonetheless be significant and important to him or her personally. The characters of the stories represent roles to be filled by the reader, and they represent *exempla*. What is read needs to be studied, repeated, memorized, and applied to one's personal life constantly, thus becoming an absolute mental space which will be present during everyday life activities. This is a teaching to be applied to one's life, to be meditated, and to be given life through one's actions, thoughts and words. It is the "mirror of perfection."

Here the presentation space is built by what we have in the base space, and includes elements and relationships such as an active role which performs upon a passive role, an intentional action, motivated by the desire of being the beneficiary of the effect of that action: "do unto others as you would wish them do to you." We would have two presentation spaces: one for reality and one for another possible world. The imperative "do" is a space builder, opening up another mental space: here there is a second-person commanded to perform a temporally present act upon a third-person. The second part of the Rule, "you would wish," in turn, builds an ideal presentation space where the active and passive roles of the first presentation space are inverted, so that the second-person desires a temporally imprecise act performed by a third-person (fig. 2). There is no mentioning of the second person being in the same situation as the third (it is ideal, temporally imprecise), but this will be inferred as we shall see further on.

The text will always point to the devotee-reader and to his or her life-story, which constitutes the reference space, another mental space. This is a deictic space,



anchoring the meaning to a specific context, here, the reader. I would consider the proper reading of sacred literature by a devotee as a metaphor, where the text is the source and the reader-devotee is the target. Story, projection and parable are basic to human everyday thought, and we are used to identifying ourselves with others (as Turner, 1996 has largely illustrated), which is also why humans are capable of empathy. In the text, any of the stories' *personæ* will lose their role to the reader, who will fill the roles by identifying with them as we shall see further on (all roles except for that of the Divinity: it is God who is talking to the reader throughout the text, and such a compression would be incompatible for the devotee's expectations).

The reader is the protagonist of the reading, and listens devoutly to the Divine Word, which will virtually act out his or her life-story, giving him or her an example to follow through another story. The devotee is actively reading the Divine Word, to which he or she is completely passive, impotent, and submissive. The addressed

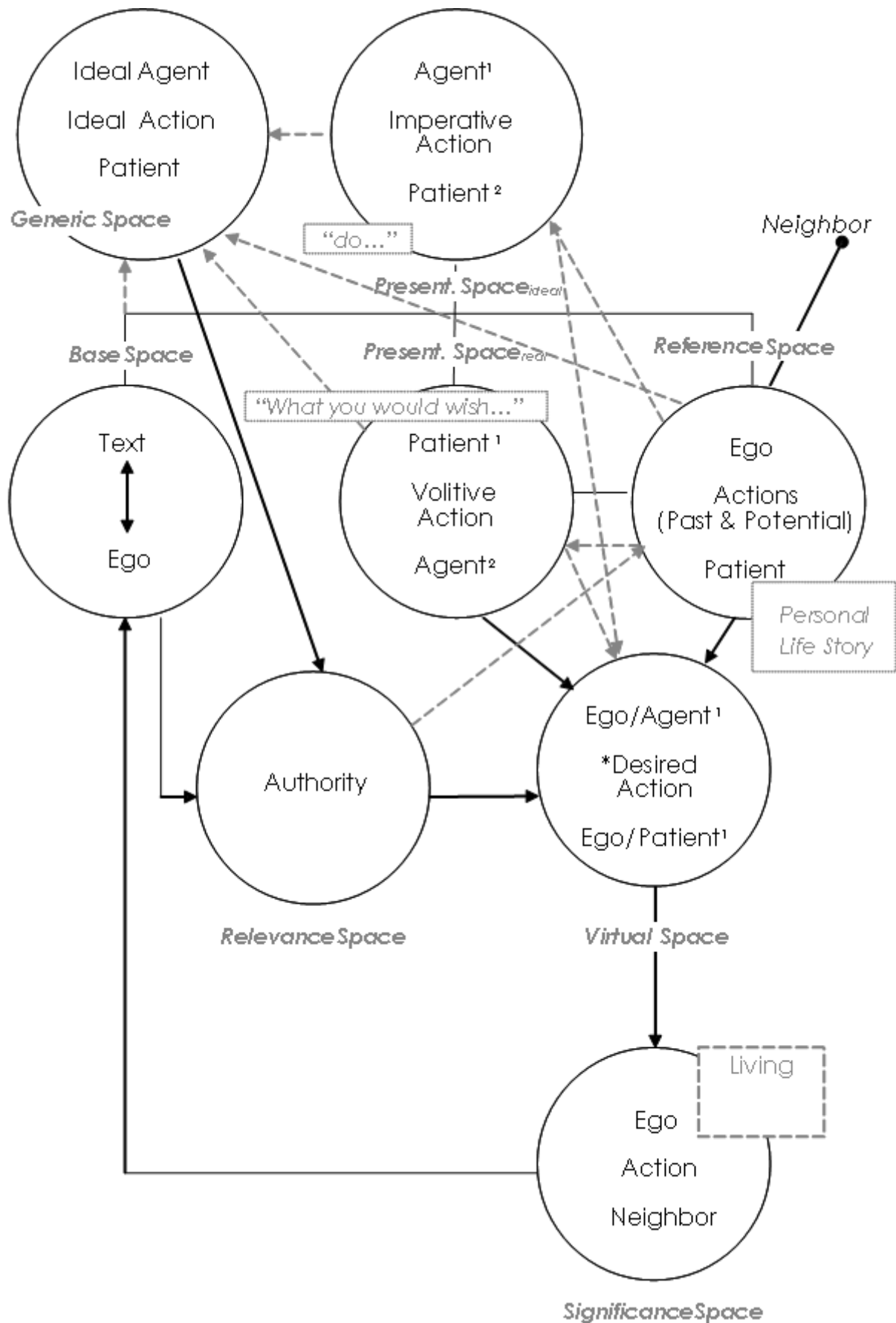
"you" of the text is the reader him or herself, here and now, with all of his or her will, desires and life situations, by virtue of the metonymic compression (this is what I call an "epistolary reading" of the sacred text); the "others" is a prompt for a third person in relationship to the reader which is recruited from the reader's everyday life (for example the family next door) and this space is also made up of what he or she actually does through personal actions. Because we are dealing with a deictic space, the attention will naturally be allocated on the reader's life (after all, the devotee is reading the sacred literature for him or herself), so the reader will become the agent of the actions.

The reader so far has finished reading the text, and mental spaces dealing with the text and the reader who believes that the divine scripture is written for him or her have been built. The reader starts to make the connections between written text and real life, exploring the deeper meanings of what is being "said to him or her". There is a mapping across the counterparts of the mental spaces built so far, based on analogy, metaphor, relationship and so on. These elements and relationships are blended into another space called virtual space, in which the text story becomes the *figura* (Auerbach, 1953) of his or her own personal life. The devotee already knows that he or she is the main actor of the scenario and has recruited (in our example) his or her neighbors to perform the role of the "others" to whom he or she must actively "do" a deed. The devotee was, however, also presented with the role of who has a deed done. It is at this point that it is understood that the reader must be subjected to the same deed he or she must eventually do, but this is the interpretation given (it is not explicit in the text). The devotee virtually becomes the poor family (*figuram implere*), perhaps the father if the reader is a man, or the mother if she is a woman (by analogy that is via another compression). "[I]t appears to be a psychological universal that one's self-conception is structured into a hierarchy of properties; properties such as sex and race are high in the hierarchy while properties such as ring size are lower. It appears that readers and auditors identify in their self-conception and they prefer works involving characters with whom they identify" (Hogan, 1997; 236). The devotee is virtually commanded to "Do unto *yourself* what *you* do wish," and the tense is the present, now, at a moment which is highly empathetic towards his or her neighbors.

He, the father of a poor family (the reader thinks, for example), might wish for receiving food and clothing or being offered a job.

So far, I might mention that the whole interpretative act could have gone entirely differently, which is why this is only one possible example. A different reader might have considered the text referred to someone else, for example, if the text is not considered to be sacred. Many times we may have encountered this text ourselves, even orally, yet we may not have actually gone through with the blend, and may have stopped at simply comprehending the phrase. Now, to stop and think of who the "others" are and "what to do" means to delay categorization by building more elaborate mental spaces connected by cross-space mappings. Why should this be taken as something the devotee-reader must do? Why does this become so important for the reader? More interestingly: how and why does this type of sacred literature actually change the life of the devotee?

The reader-devotee builds another mental space, which is set up by a schema that will be relevant for the reader's given meaning and for the emotional value of his interpretation. The schema here will be that of wanting to please the Divinity for whatever reason, which is why the reader approaches the sacred literature, that is, expecting a divine lesson. "Ontogenetically, the devotee develops a disposition to see his life played out in the scriptures, but this can happen as a result of entering a religious tradition where the textualization of the divine has already taken place" (Todd Oakley, personal communication). It is a force-dynamic schema in that there is a moral constraint caused by the authority that is attributed to the text. This space commands what is going to emerge, and explains why the text is so important for the devotee-reader, and probably less important for the lay reader.



From Reading to Acting

The elaboration loop that goes from the relevance space to the blend of the virtual space, through the reference space and the presentation spaces is the process for which the blend "do unto yourself what you wish" begins to take a more complete form (fig. 3). It explains how the selective projection takes place: some content is selected from the personal life experiences of the subject (past actions that he or she wants to reenact, the present situations that he or she still needs to choose, the neighbor) and projected according to the text. Thus the second person (the reader) is virtually in the same situation as the third person (the other), although the text does not say "Do to others what you would wish them do to you *if you were in their present personal life situation.*" This latter part is not explicit and is inferred through what emerges from the blend.

The degree of authority which will be relevant will drive the devotee to accept the text as epistolary. If the devotee has some confirmations on the text's authority, then he or she will be convinced to accept the text addressed personally (this confirmation may come from the superiors of his or her religious system, from society, or from personal conviction such as faith). The more this schema structures the virtual blend, the more there will be an interpretation of the text that will be the content of the meaning space. Everything becomes less virtual and more concrete, the volatile and intended action will not be performed on a virtual self, and there is the realization that the action must be towards the other because 1) it is wanted by the other, 2) because it is wanted by the author-authority (i.e., God, whom the reader-devotee wishes to please), 3) because it is wanted by the reader-devotee him or herself. The devotee lives in the blend. The personal context of the reader-devotee will be influenced when he or she approaches the sacred text again, whether he or she adheres to the command or refuses the teaching, and the hermeneutic process will also influence subsequent behaviors in such a context.

Conclusions

The interpretation, or the meaning, given to the sacred text by the reader obviously differs from person to person, but through this model of interpretation we have noticed some universals because of the very nature of the literary subject matter, the authority given to the text, and the cognitive factors involved during on-line ritual reading. A similar sense of "awe" as has been described here is potentially possible in other types of readings, such as poetry, or even other types of appreciation of the arts, but for the category of devotee-readers, we must say that it goes beyond mystical experience or contemplation towards everyday revelation and conviction of a life-changing experience. When the mental space of relevance, of the respect for the Divinity and wanting to please It, becomes more and more reinforced, it becomes an absolute mental space which will be integrated with the devotee's everyday life.

The Brandts' version of Fauconnier & Turner's conceptual integration as it was here exposed is (coincidentally) very similar to Saint Augustine of Hippo's *lectio divina* as it is prescribed in its steps: the base space coincides with the *statio*, the *lectio* would be the presentation space, the reference and the relevance space correspond to *meditatio* and *oratio*, the virtual space could be compared to the *contemplation*, and the significance space would be the *action*. Even more so, it is suggested so as to delay categorization during this type of ritual reading, but all religious systems teach to take time to read and fully understand the meaning that is in the sacred text.

Every religious system teaches its faithful to carefully read and discover what God wants to reveal to them now, during their reading of the sacred text, and when the faithful have searched and found a correspondence with their own personal life story, they feel like they are reading a letter from God. It would be difficult to say that something like that wouldn't change your life – that is, if you believe in it.

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