

Sin Has A Bitter Taste

July 24, 2012

When writers craft metaphors such as the “warmth of friendship,” they aren’t just making an arbitrary connection between temperature and social bonds. Behavioral scientists have shown that certain metaphors, called embodied metaphors, describe physical experiences that are connected to an individual’s thought processes.

The researchers in this symposium were specifically interested in the connection between moral judgment and sensory experiences such as taste, visual perception, and touch. For example, it turns out there is some truth to the idea of thinking in “black and white.” Priming people with a black-and-white checkerboard led them to make more clearly defined decisions about whether a situation was morally acceptable or morally reprehensible compared to individuals who were shown a gray box or a blue-and-yellow checkerboard.

Such metaphors are relatively modern compared to the ones that connect religious virtue with cleanliness. In the United States, researchers have found there is a strong correlation between religiousness and an individual’s inclination toward cleanliness. Religious individuals were more likely to use cleanliness terms to complete a sentence, and also showed a preference for cleaning products over office supplies. They also felt more religious when they were primed with thoughts of cleanliness compared to dirtiness.

Disgust, whether it comes from feeling dirty or from a nasty taste in your mouth, can also influence moral judgments. People who consumed Swedish bitters, a foul but reportedly healthy concoction, made harsher moral judgments than individuals who had consumed fruit punch or water. The opposite effect has also been observed in which a moral transgression can make a drink taste more bitter.

Many researchers have empirically demonstrated the existence of embodied metaphors, but what do theorists have to say about them? A current model presented in this symposium suggests that not only are these effects bidirectional, but they are also extremely sensitive to context and are another way for the brain to store information.

Ultimately, the researchers in this symposium showed that writers and poets don’t have a monopoly on metaphor, and their science show that there are strong behavioral concepts behind the words.

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