

# SIMILE AND METAPHOR IN MEDICAL ENGLISH

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**Abstract:** *In the present article, we focus on simile and explore, in the light of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory, its interconnectivity with metaphor in Medical English. Having juxtaposed simile and metaphor on the axes of truthfulness and meaning, we establish conceptual metaphor as the primordial nexus of the two. We do not attempt to deny or blur the differences between metaphors and similes as linguistic expressions; rather, we emphatically suggest that similes ought to be examined in the context of the conceptual metaphors they correspond to.*

**Key words:** *simile, conceptual metaphor, Medical English*

## СРАВНЕНИЕ И МЕТАФОРА В МЕДИЦИНСКИЯ АНГЛИЙСКИ ЕЗИК

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**Резюме:** *В статията на фокус е сравнението, като в светлината на теорията на концептуалната метафора се разглежда взаимосвързаността на сравнението и метафората в медицинския английски език. След съпоставка на сравнението и метафората според разположението им върху осите на истинност и значение, установяваме концептуалната метафора като изначалието на двата феномена. Не правим опит за отричане или размиване на различията между сравнението и метафората в ролята им на лингвистични изрази, а емфатично предлагаме сравненията да се изследват в контекста на концептуалните метафори, чиито изражения представляват.*

**Ключови думи:** *сравнение, концептуална метафора, медицински английски език*

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### Metaphor and the Like

In the last few decades there has been a mounting number of articles dedicated to metaphor in Medical English. These articles examine medical metaphor from diverse viewpoints, ranging from the one of the linguist as seen in Elena Semino's "Fire, waves, and warfare: the way we make sense of COVID" (Semino 2021) to the one to of the clinisist as in Mary Seeman's "Use of metaphors when treating unexplained medical symptoms" (Seeman 2023).

However, we feel that the two major *likes* of metaphor, simile and metonymy, have not received their due share of interest, this being especially true in the case of simile. Thus, in the present article, we have opted to focus on simile and explore its interconnectivity with metaphor in Medical English.

### Conceptual Metaphors

A few decades ago, the Conceptual Metaphor Theory put an end to the prevalent understanding of metaphors as "matters of language and not matters of thought or action" (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 153). It is now widely accepted that "metaphor is primarily a matter of thought and action and only derivatively a matter of language" (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 153).

However, we still use the term *metaphor* to refer to both the *conceptual metaphor* at the level of reason and the metaphor at the level of language, i.e. the

*metaphoric expression*. In other words, we are dealing with both conceptual phenomena and their linguistic expressions, “metaphors as linguistic expressions are possible precisely because there are metaphors in a person’s conceptual system” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 6). We are, indeed, faced with a “coherent system of metaphorical concepts and a corresponding coherent system of metaphorical expressions for those concepts” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 9).

The Conceptual Metaphor Theory has allowed for new perspectives on phenomena that are related or close to metaphor: metonymy, simile, personification, synecdoche. Among these *likes*, none has received greater attention than metonymy. The boundary between metaphor and metonymy has been blurred. Recent research has added to and modified the now classical understanding of the two as “different *kinds* of processes”, metaphor being “a way of conceiving of one thing in terms of another, and its primary function [being...] understanding. Metonymy, on the other hand, has primarily a referential function, that is, it allows one entity to *stand* for another” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 36). The new light that is being shed on the interaction between metaphor and metonymy has even made it possible to pose the existence of a metaphor-metonymy continuum (Jiménez-Muñoz and Lahuerta Martínez 2017).

### **Defining Simile**

While the scientific interest in metonymy is on the rise, no such surge has been observed regarding simile.

Even though there could be some confusion when trying to distinguish between the two (Merriam-Webster 2023), there seems to be a clear demarcation line between them. Simile is known to be an indirect comparison while metaphor is considered a direct one. Such is the common understanding expressed in dictionaries or other resources of readily available information (Dictionary.com 2021, Grammarly 2022). In the former case, the distance is established physically by virtue of intervening words such as “like” or “as”; in the latter case, there is no room left for such detachment. The classic juxtaposition of simile and metaphor is found in the simile “My love is like a red, red rose” and the metaphor “love is a rose” (Merriam-Webster 2023).

It is important to note that when defining simile, it is typically contrasted and compared to metaphor: in dictionaries, immediately following the definition “a figure of speech that expresses the resemblance of one thing to another of a different category, usually introduced by *as* or *like*”, we find “compare metaphor” (Collins 2023), with the same expression succeeding “a figure of speech comparing two unlike things that is often introduced by *like* or *as* (as in *cheeks like roses*)” (Merriam-Webster 2023).

Interestingly enough, certain authors claim that simile is actually a direct comparison. Such writers do not deny the physical distance created by virtue of using intervening words such as “like” or “as”; rather, they consider the explicitness of the comparison ground to deem it *direct* comparison (Cabag 2022: 1). In other words, metaphor is an indirect comparison since “an indirect comparison happens when the comparison is implied” (Cabag 2022: 1).

### **Simile and Metaphor: On the Axis of Truth**

One way to juxtapose simile and metaphor is according to their relation to truth, i.e. their truthfulness or falseness. A well-known critic of metaphor theories, Davidson, suggests, namely, such a contrast. His central claim in *What Metaphors*

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*Mean* is that “metaphors mean what the words, in their most literal interpretation, mean, and nothing more”, and hence he takes issue with “the central mistake... that a metaphor has, in addition to its literal sense or meaning, another sense or meaning” (Davidson 1978: 32). Davidson exposes certain characteristics of metaphor in light of his understanding that “metaphor belongs exclusively to the domain of use”: it cannot be paraphrased, it does not easily lend to interpretation (Davidson 1978: 33, 39). Furthermore, when contrasted to simile, it emerges as “*patently* false, just as all similes are trivially true”, which is due to the fact that “generally it is only when a sentence is taken to be false that we accept it as a metaphor” (Davidson 1978: 42). Indeed, Davidson’s understanding of metaphor seems to be rooted in the juxtaposition between metaphor and simile. The latter is blatantly true: it “wears a declaration of similitude on its sleeve”, with its author being open about it, “the author of the simile intended us -that is, meant us- to notice that similarity” (Davidson 1978: 40); the former invites us to “hunt out the hidden implication” (Davidson 1978: 42).

Davidson is insistent upon this dichotomy, and refers to it repeatedly using expressions similar to the one that “the most obvious semantic difference between simile and metaphor is that all similes are true and most metaphors are false” (Davidson 1978: 41). However, it remains unclear how the *falsehood* of metaphor as opposed to simile’s *truthfulness* supports the central idea of metaphor being a question of usage, rather than language (which flavors strongly of Saussure’s *parole* vs. *langue*). Perhaps an explanation might be provided if we consider that while metaphor’s literal sense may be true, its evocation of another meaning could be its falsehood. Davidson himself doesn’t offer such a clarification: he piles up key claims such as “what distinguishes metaphor is not meaning but use-in this it is like assertion, hinting, lying, promising, or criticizing” (Davidson 1978: 43) and “metaphor makes us see one thing as another by making some literal statement that inspires or prompts the insight” (Davidson 1978: 47). Thus we feel pressured to look for and suggest a possible explanation ourselves. It is no wonder that while Davidson’s criticism of other metaphor theories is widely accepted, his own attempt at a theory is criticized, “Davidson takes a radical stance... to assert that the words in a metaphor mean nothing other than their original, literal meaning...while succeeding in refuting most of the “other meaning” theories, only weakly suggests “use” of metaphor to explain its power.” (Ayoob 2007: 56)

The whole issue of metaphor’s falsehood that Davidson is so insistent upon, is not among Lakoff and Johnson’s concerns. The two researchers systematically refute the classical assumption that “it is possible to give an account of truth in itself, free of human understanding” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 184). For the pair, “metaphors are basically devices for understanding and have little to do with objective reality, if there is such a thing” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 184). We can claim that metaphors are true in as far as they are true within our conceptual system, yet they are indeed relative, and their truth is relative only – within a conceptual system – and cannot be objectively and universally true. The simple reason is that such objective truth, devoid and independent of human understanding, does not exist, “truth is always relative to a conceptual system... any human conceptual system is mostly metaphorical in nature... therefore, there is no fully objective, unconditional, or absolute truth” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 185).

### **Simile and Metaphor: On the Axis of Meaning**

Simile and metaphor can also be juxtaposed according to the way they render meaning. Max Black identifies two major views on the meaning-rendering capacity of metaphor.

The first one unites the so-called *substitution view* of metaphor with the *comparison view*. The substitution view is “any view which holds that a metaphorical expression is used in place of some equivalent *literal* expression” (Black 1962: 31). The understanding that “a metaphor consists in the *presentation* of the underlying analogy or similarity” represents the comparison view; this is “a view of metaphor as a condensed or elliptical *simile*” (Black 1962: 35). The comparison view is, in fact, nothing but a “special case of a “substitution view”” (Black 1962: 35). Both the substitution and comparison view consider metaphor as “standing in place of some literal equivalent”, the latter view offering “a more elaborate paraphrase” (Black 1962: 36).

Hence the first major way of understanding metaphor brings it close to simile: both the substitution and the comparison view are based on the existence of a literal, preexisting meaning. In a sense, all metaphors are similes (albeit concealed).

The second major way of viewing metaphor is the one that Black himself suggests, the *interaction* way. What makes the interaction view drastically different from both the substitution and comparison view is the creation of new meaning. A word “obtains a new meaning, which is not quite its meaning in literal uses, nor quite the meaning which any literal substitute would have” (Black 1962: 39). The author calls this new meaning or context “the “frame” of the metaphor” and sees it as what “imposes extension of meaning upon the focal word” (Black 1962: 39). Metaphor is about “shifts in meaning” (Black 1962: 45).

Thus metaphor is a creator of meaning, not simply a recapturer of preexisting meaning by analogy or similarity, “metaphor could create new meaning, create similarities, and thereby define a new reality” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 211). By extension, all similes are metaphors. The similarity expressed by a simile is created by a metaphor. For instance, we can contrast Black’s example of *Man is a wolf*, a metaphor (Black 1962: 39), to *Man is like a wolf*, a simile, and wonder whether both expressions do not correspond to one and the same conceptual metaphor, HUMANS ARE ANIMALS. After all, “metaphors can create similarities” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 153) and similes express similarities.

### **Similes and Conceptual Metaphors**

We seem justified in claiming that all similes are actually metaphors, or rather that **a simile is an instance that corresponds to a conceptual metaphor**. For instance, *time is like water*, a simile, is an instance of TIME IS MOTION, conceptual metaphor. The metaphor *time is a river* is an instance of the same conceptual metaphor. Hence, we see how instances at the level of language, be it a simile-instance or a metaphoric instance, are representations of the same metaphor at the level of thought. Here we will no longer continue the line of argument to delve beyond the actual conceptual metaphor of TIME IS MOTION to the possible umbrella metaphor TIME IS SPACE (TIME IS SPACE metaphor being often viewed as “a cover term of more specific conceptual metaphors” (Capelle 2023: 5)). Thus it is our understanding that **all similes and metaphors are united in being representations of conceptual metaphors**.

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This understanding is analogical to the one Lakoff and Johnson have on two other types of expressions, “literal expressions (“He has constructed a theory”) and imaginative expressions (“His theory is covered with gargoyles”) can be instances of the same general metaphor (THEORIES ARE BUILDINGS)” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 53).

In the earlier example of the conceptual metaphor HUMANS ARE ANIMALS, we can easily observe that this conceptual metaphor serves as an umbrella metaphor to various conceptual metaphors such as MAN IS A WOLF (Black 1962: 39), WOMAN IS A COW, WOMAN IS A BITCH (Lopéz Rodríguez 2009: 79), etc. The conceptual metaphors themselves can find their linguistic representation in either a metaphoric or a metonymic form, or in a combination of the two. Here we do not intend to examine the various patterns of interaction between metaphor and metonymy (and, for ex., label the expression *hawk’s eyes* as belonging to the pattern of “Metonymic reduction of one of the correspondences of the metaphoric source” (Ruiz Gil and Herrero Ruiz 2005: 934)). Rather, we are interested in the fact the expression *Peter foxed me* can be viewed not only as a metaphoric one, but as a metonymic one as well: since we are faced with a case of AGENT FOR ACTION metonymy (Ruiz Gil and Herrero Ruiz 2005: 935). Thus both metaphoric and metonymic expressions, found at the level of language, correspond to conceptual metaphors, located at the level of thought. Similes have already been shown to be linguistic instances of conceptual metaphors. Hence, simply put, metaphor and its *likes* can all be traced back down to conceptual metaphor.

#### **Metaphor as the Primordial Nexus**

Metaphor has already been identified as a crucial nexus by Umberto Eco. Despite the use of *metaphor* in the sense of a “rhetorical figure... a trope” (Eco 1986: 87), his findings that all rhetorical figures stem from metaphor are valid in the light of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory as well. Eco identifies the synecdochic paradox of metaphor as what makes it so hard to define and differentiate from its likes. On one hand, metaphor is “a figure of speech that has been recognized by many to be the basis of every other”; on the other hand, metaphor, “a trope that seems to be the most primary [,] will appear instead as the most derivative” (Eco 1986: 87).

The Conceptual Metaphor Theory enables us to cut this Gordian knot: it suffices to realize that it is the dual usage of one and the same term, metaphor, that has tied the knot. Indeed, the term denotes both metaphoric expressions and conceptual metaphors, the former being “the most derivative”, with the latter remaining “the most primary”. Hence metaphor in the sense of conceptual metaphor, metaphor at the level of reasoning, is the primordial nexus: it brings together all like expressions that appear at the level of language, be them metaphoric expressions, similes, metonymies, etc.

Of course, this line of reasoning cannot but bring us to the problem of the tautological definition of metaphor, “If it is metaphor that founds language, it is impossible to speak of metaphor unless metaphorically” (Eco 1986: 88). Furthermore, “the inner nature of metaphors produces a shifting of the linguistic explanation onto semiotic mechanisms that are not peculiar to spoken languages... the verbal metaphor itself often elicits references to visual, aural, tactile, and olfactory experiences” (Eco 1986: 88-89).

The same sentiment is echoed in *Metaphors We Live By*, “Metaphor is not merely a matter of language. It is a matter of conceptual structure. And conceptual structure is

not merely a matter of the intellect - it involves all the natural dimensions of our experience” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 235). Hence metaphor is reason and knowledge, the structure of knowledge being experience-dependent. “Metaphor provides a way of partially communicating unshared experiences, and it is the natural structure of our experience that makes this possible” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 225). Thus we go beyond Kant’s dichotomy of *a priori* and *posteriori* knowledge: reason itself cannot exist in human-free void, it is always experience-based not because of a particular instance of experience, own or someone else’s, but because its nature, its *structure* is experience-dependent.

Furthermore, metaphor is impossible without an “underlying semiotic network” (Eco 1986: 129), without “a rich cultural framework” (Eco 1986: 127), yet it is also a part of the network, a part of the framework. While it is clear that we can safely paraphrase Descartes as *I think, therefore I metaphorize*, it is also true that *I think, therefore I use language*. Thus, unveiling the conceptual metaphors at the level of thought is possible only by examining their expressions in language: only through the linguistic expressions can we hope to reach the conceptual metaphors they are expressions of, “since metaphorical expressions in our language are tied to metaphorical concepts in a systematic way, we can use metaphorical linguistic expressions to study the nature of metaphorical concepts and to gain an understanding of the metaphorical nature of our activities” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 7). This unveiling is further required to take place within a framework or a network, i.e. within the bounds of the understanding of the *society of communicators* that creates and uses metaphor. Understanding itself “comes out of our constant interactions with our physical, cultural, and interpersonal environment” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 232). Metaphors cannot be arbitrarily engendered and/or utilized: they depend on “the interpreter’s intertextual competence” (Eco 1986: 121).

### **Simile in Medical English**

Such a society of communicators is constituted by Medical English users. It is their “intertextual competence”, their “constant interactions” with their environment that establish the framework within which medical metaphors operate. Of course, it is crucial to remember that the interpretation of metaphors, with the “underlying semiotic network”, is a question of “unlimited semiosis” (Eco 1986: 113). We can trace a metaphoric expression to a conceptual metaphor; however, this expression does not necessarily *belong* to a single conceptual metaphor, nor even to a single-level conceptual metaphor. An example of the latter can be found in the metaphoric expression *The Wolf of Wall Street*. It enacts the conceptual metaphor MAN IS A WOLF which is housed within the umbrella metaphor, a second-level conceptual metaphor, HUMANS ARE ANIMALS. An instance of the former can be provided by the metaphoric expression *the next wave of COVID*: it can be an enactment of the conceptual metaphor DISEASE AS NATURE, but also of the conceptual metaphor DISEASE AS A DESTRUCTIVE FORCE.

In Medical English, we can locate many other examples of metaphoric expressions whose exclusive relation to a particular conceptual metaphor turns out to be problematic. While we do not find this complexity worrying, we are concerned about the possibility of examining similes without their corresponding conceptual metaphor(s). As demonstrated above, similes are linguistic expressions, each corresponding to a

conceptual metaphor. Hence we believe that simile cannot be considered without metaphor. For Medical English research, the implications of such an understanding of simile are far from trivial: regardless of the preferred way of classifying medical metaphors, the classification of all similes must take into consideration the classification of metaphors. In other words, **simile classification and examination ought to be metaphor-based.**

Let us consider the classical classification of medical metaphors (exemplified by S. Vasirub in his 1977 book *Medicine's Metaphors: Messages and Menaces*) by thematic fields. If we look at the linguistic expression, a simile, *He fought cancer like a superhero/ warrior/ champion*, we can easily identify it as corresponding to conceptual WAR metaphor. The metaphoric expression *He was a true superhero/ warrior/ champion in his fight with cancer* corresponds to the same conceptual metaphor.

Another example of a simile, *COVID spread like wildfire* (Klein 2021:1), corresponds to the conceptual FIRE metaphor. The metaphor (metaphoric expression) used by the World Health Organization, *the fire is not out*, has also been identified as corresponding to the FIRE metaphor (Semino 2021:1). In *the new wave of coronavirus infections is spreading like "wildfire" across India* (Anadolu Agency 2021:1), we find a metaphoric expression that corresponds to the conceptual metaphor DISEASE AS A DESTRUCTIVE FORCE and/or DISEASE AS NATURE (*COVID as a wave*), coupled with a simile that corresponds to the FIRE metaphor (*COVID as a fire*). In addition, the conceptual metaphor DISEASE AS A DESTRUCTIVE FORCE and/or DISEASE AS NATURE is also enacted at the level of language by the simile *COVID is a tidal wave* (Sherlong 2020:1)

Of course, the so-called FIRE metaphor is not limited to COVID. The same metaphor is present in reference to other viral diseases both as a metaphoric expression, *SARS burns out* (Wallis and Nerlich 2005: 2635) and as a simile, *HIV is like fire* (Chubb 2014: 137). Hence, we are faced with instances of the conceptual metaphor DISEASE AS FIRE. If we continue to unveil the metaphoric levels, we can certainly reach the umbrella metaphor DISEASE AS A DESTRUCTIVE FORCE.

### **Simile in a Medical English Textbook**

As stated, the main purpose of the present article is to suggest a theoretical basis for the examination of simile in Medical English as conceptual metaphor-based. Its practical ramifications can be witnessed in the examination of a textbook of Medical English such as Dankiv, Shtoltzel, and Nad's "Medical English Textbook". Using the AntConc corpus search engine, we have identified only eight *medical* similes, i.e. similes that are typical of medical discourse and are health-related. Hence similes that are not medical, i.e. that belong to the general discourse in English and are not health-specific, as in the expression *Young women aspired to be like her* have been excluded. Furthermore, even though all of the similes include the keyword *like*, expressions with the keyword *like* used in the sense of *such as* have been excluded as well (as in *When you have this, your adrenal glands don't make enough of certain hormones, like cortisol, which controls stress.*)

Each one of the medical similes that we have identified can be examined in terms of a conceptual metaphor. In accordance with the traditional Conceptual Metaphor Theory classification suggested by Lakoff and Johnson in their *Metaphors We Live By*, we categorize metaphors into three main types: structural, orientational, and ontological.

TREATMENT IS WAR is perhaps the most common representative of structural metaphors in Medical English, such metaphors being “cases where one concept is metaphorically structured in terms of another” (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 14). HEALTH IS UP, ILLNESS IS DOWN is a classical medical orientational metaphor since it “organizes a whole system of concepts with respect to one another” (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 14). BODY IS A HOUSE is a typical ontological metaphor in medical discourse, ontological metaphors stemming from the fact that “understanding our experiences in terms of objects and substances allows us to pick out parts of our experience and treat them as discreet entities or substances of a uniform kind” (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 25).

All of the eight similes can be traced back to ontological metaphors. There are a couple of instances of the simile *fingerlike*, which is based on understanding of a body part in terms of a familiar and observable shape, that of a finger, *In the wall of the entire small intestine are millions of tiny, **fingerlike** projections called villi (singular: villus) and Intercalated disks are made up of **fingerlike** projections from two neighboring cells that interlock and provide a strong bond between the cells.* Two other instances interpret body characteristics in the context of everyday objects, *a rubber band* and *a board*, *These circular muscles help keep urine from leaking by closing tightly **like** a rubber band around the opening of the bladder* and *Indications of peritonitis are called “peritoneal signs”: tender abdomen, rebound pain (pain when manual pressure released from examining abdomen), **board-like** rigidity of abdominal muscles, and no bowel sounds (gurgles).* Understanding new shapes in terms of familiar ones is present in the appearance similes *Striated just **like** cardiac muscle, these skeletal muscle fibers are very strong* and *Dysplasia means that cells are abnormal, there are more cells than normal, the cells are growing faster than normal and they aren’t arranged **like** normal cells.* Another simile, *Scientists believe that the needles may stimulate the brain to produce **morphine-like** painkillers called endorphins and enkephalins,* allows for the comprehension of not-easily observable chemicals in terms of the well-studied *morphine*. The simile *worm-like* in *The vermiform (**worm-like**) appendix hangs from the caecum; the appendix is a blind alley and has no function* is, actually, a rendition of the metaphoric instance *worm-shaped, vermiform*, which comes from Latin *vermis* – worm, which is an animal metaphor.

The last two similes are not only representative of an underlying ontological metaphor: they are themselves metaphorical instances. Medical terminology is, indeed, metaphorical to a great extent since metaphor is a “nomination technique” (Amudzhieva 2021: 66), with the original metaphorical rendition being most often in Latin as not only in *vermiform*, but also in *morphine* – from Latin *morpheus* - sleep and Ancient Greek – Μορφεύς, the god of dreams. Even though Medical English is replete with metaphors, examining them lies beyond the scope of the present research, which represents an examination of simile in terms of conceptual metaphors, not their metaphorical instances.

## Conclusions

In light of the Conceptual Theory Metaphor, we consider two influential ways of differentiating between simile and metaphor, those suggested by Donald Davidson and Max Black. We express our support for Lakoff and Johnson’s subjectivization of truth, which undermines Davidson’s insistence on contrasting simile and metaphor on



the axis of truthfulness. Simultaneously, we view Black's axis of meaning as a productive way to interpret simile in terms of metaphor, which in turn makes us embrace Umberto Eco's understanding of metaphor as an underlying nexus or network. Having set aside the role of truthfulness, we are free to rely on meaning to bring simile closer to metaphor. Finally, having offered a theoretical basis for the examination of simile in Medical English as conceptual metaphor-based, we put it to practice in the examination of a Medical English textbook, thus illustrating its practical implications.

It is important to clarify that we do not attempt to deny or blur the differences between metaphors and similes as linguistic expressions; rather, we emphatically suggest that **similes ought to be examined in the light of the conceptual metaphors they correspond to**. This, actually, is our main deduction, with the present examination of similes in a Medical English textbook being only a sampling of how such examination ought to be carried out: it is, in a sense, a metaphorical invitation for further research.

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