

# Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think, by George Lakoff, an excerpt

An excerpt from  
Moral Politics  
How Liberals and Conservatives Think  
George Lakoff

## Chapter Two The Worldview Problem for American Politics

### Puzzles for Liberals

Conservatives are fond of suggesting that liberals don't understand what they say, that they just don't get it. The conservatives are right. The ascendancy of conservative ideology in recent years and, in particular, the startling conservative victory in the 1994 congressional elections have left liberals mystified about a great many things. Here are some examples.

William Bennett, a major conservative politician and intellectual leader, has put a major part of his efforts into moral education. He has written *The Book of Virtues*, an 800-page collection of classical moral stories for children, which has been on the best-seller lists for more than eighty straight weeks. Why do conservatives think that virtue and morality should be identified with their *political* agenda and what view of morality do they profess?

Family values and fatherhood have recently become central to conservative politics. What are those family values, what is that conception of fatherhood, and what do they have to do with politics?

The conservative Speaker of the House of Representatives, embracing family values, suggested that the children of welfare mothers be taken away from the only families they have known and be placed in orphanages. This sounded like a contradiction of family values to liberals, but not to conservatives. Why?

Conservatives are largely against abortion, saying that they want to save the lives of unborn fetuses. The United States has an extremely high infant-mortality rate, largely due to the lack of adequate prenatal care for low-income mothers. Yet conservatives are not in favor of government programs providing such prenatal care and have voted to eliminate existing programs that have succeeded in lowering the infant mortality rate. Liber-

als find this illogical. It appears to liberals that "pro-life" conservatives *do* want to prevent the death of those fetuses whose mothers *do not* want them (through stopping abortion), but *do not* want to prevent the deaths of fetuses whose mothers *do* want them (through providing adequate prenatal care programs). Conservatives see no contradiction. Why?

Liberals also find it illogical that right-to-life advocates are mostly in favor of capital punishment. This seems natural to conservatives. Why?

Conservatives are opposed to welfare and to government funds for the needy but are in favor of government funds going to victims of floods, fires, and earthquakes who are in need. Why isn't this contradictory?

A liberal supporter of California's 1994 single-payer initiative was speaking to a conservative audience and decided to appeal to their financial self-interest. He pointed out that the savings in administrative costs would get them the same health benefits for less money while also paying for health care for the indigent. A woman responded, "It just sounds wrong to me. I would be paying for somebody else." Why did his appeal to her economic self-interest fail?

Conservatives are willing to increase the budgets for the military and for prisons on the grounds that they provide protection. But they want to eliminate regulatory agencies whose job is to protect the public, especially workers and consumers. Conservatives do not conceptualize regulation as a form of protection, only as a form of interference. Why?

Conservatives claim to favor states' rights over the power of the federal government. Yet their proposal for tort reform will invest the federal government with considerable powers previously held by the states, the power to determine what lawsuits can be brought for product liability and securities fraud, and hence the power to control product safety standards and ethical financial practices. Why is this shift of power from the states to the federal government not considered a violation of states' rights by conservatives?

In these cases, what is irrational, mysterious, or just plain evil or corrupt to liberals is natural, straightforward, and moral to conservatives. Yet, the answers to all these questions are obvious if you understand the conservative worldview, as we shall see below.

Of course, most conservatives have just as little understanding of liberals. To conservatives, liberal positions seem outrageously immoral or just plain foolish. Here are some corresponding questions that conservatives have about liberal positions.

Liberals support welfare and education proposals to aid children, yet they sanction the murder of children by supporting the practice of abortion. Isn't this contradictory?

How can liberals claim to favor the rights of children, when they champion the rights of criminals, such as convicted child molesters? How can liberals claim empathy for victims when they defend the rights of criminals?

How can liberals support federal funding for AIDS research and treatment, while promoting the spread of AIDS by sanctioning sexual behavior that leads to AIDS? In defending gay rights, liberals sanction homosexual sex; they sanction teenage sex by advocating the distribution of condoms in schools; they sanction drug abuse by promoting needle exchange programs for drug users. How can liberals say they want to stop the spread of AIDS while they sanction practices that lead to it?

How can liberals claim to be supporters of labor when they support environmental restrictions that limit development and eliminate jobs?

How can liberals claim to support the expansion of the economy when they favor government regulations that limit entrepreneurship and when they tax profitable investments?

How can liberals claim to help citizens achieve the American dream when they punish financial success through the progressive income tax?

How can liberals claim to be helping people in need when they support social welfare programs that make people dependent on the government and limit their initiative?

How can liberals claim to be for equality of opportunity, when they promote racial, ethnic, and sexual favoritism by supporting affirmative action?

To conservatives, liberals seem either immoral, perverse, misguided, irrational, or just plain dumb. Yet, from the perspective of the liberal worldview, what seems contradictory or immoral or stupid to conservatives seems to liberals to be natural, rational, and, above all, moral.

These sets of puzzles present a challenge to anyone who is concerned about the structure of contemporary political thought. To the cognitive scientist, they are important data.

The job of the cognitive scientist in this instance is to characterize the largely unconscious liberal and conservative worldviews accurately enough so that an analyst can see just why the puzzles for liberals are not puzzles for conservatives, and conversely. Any cognitive scientist who seeks to describe the conservative and liberal worldviews is constrained by at least two adequacy conditions.

First, the worldviews must make the collections of political stands on each side into two natural categories. For example, the liberal worldview analysis must explain why environmentalism, feminism, support for social programs, and progressive taxation fit naturally together for liberals, while the conservative worldview analysis must explain why their opposites fit together naturally for conservatives.

Second, any adequate descriptions of these two world-views must show why the puzzles for liberals are not puzzles for conservatives, and conversely. As we shall see, this is anything but an easy problem and there are to my knowledge no previous solutions to it.

But there is a third, far more demanding, adequacy condition on the characterization of conservative and liberal worldviews. Those worldviews must additionally explain the topic choice, word choice, and discourse forms of conservatives and liberals. In short, those worldviews must explain just how conservative forms of reasoning make sense to conservatives, and the same for liberals. Moreover, they must explain why liberals and conservatives choose different topics to discuss and use different words in their discourse to discuss them. Furthermore they must explain why sometimes the same words have very different meanings when used by liberals and conservatives. As Rush Limbaugh is fond of saying, "Words have meanings." But they don't always have the same meanings to liberals and to conservatives, and where their meanings differ, those differences should be accounted for by differences in worldview.

Let us consider some examples of what must be explained.

### **The Language of Conservatism**

Conservatives like to make fun of liberals, claiming that liberals just don't speak their language. Again, the conservatives are right. There is a language of conservatism, and it's not just words. The words are familiar enough, but not what they mean. For exam-

ple, "big government" does not just refer to the size of government or the amount spent by it. One can see the misunderstanding when liberals try to reason with conservatives by pointing out that increasing the amount spent on the military and prisons increases "big government." Conservatives laugh. The liberals have just misused the term. I have heard a conservative talk of "freedom" and a liberal attempt a rebuttal by pointing out that denying a woman access to abortion limits her "freedom" to choose. Again, the liberal has used a word that has a different meaning in the conservative lexicon.

Words don't have meanings in isolation. Words are defined relative to a conceptual system. If liberals are to understand how conservatives use their words, they will have to understand the conservative conceptual system. When a conservative legislator says, in support of eliminating Aid to families with Dependent Children (AFDC), "It's alright to have a soft heart, but you've gotta have a strong backbone," one must ask exactly what that sentence means in that context, why that sentence constitutes an argument against continuing AFDC, and what exactly the argument is. In Dan Quayle's acceptance speech to the Republican convention in 1992, he said, in a rhetorical question arguing against the graduated income tax, "Why should the best people be punished?" To make sense of this, one must know why rich people are "the best people" and why the graduated income tax constitutes "punishment." In other conservative discourse, progressive taxation is referred to as "theft" and "taking people's money away from them." Conservatives do not see the progressive income tax as "paying one's fair share" or "civic duty" or even "noblesse oblige." Is there anything besides greed that leads conservatives to one view of taxation over another?

Here are some words and phrases used over and over in conservative discourse: character, virtue, discipline, tough it out, get tough, tough love, strong, self-reliance, individual responsibility, backbone, standards, authority, heritage, competition, earn, hard work, enterprise, property rights, reward, freedom, intrusion, interference, meddling, punishment, human nature, traditional, common sense, dependency, self-indulgent, elite, quotas, breakdown, corrupt, decay, rot, degenerate, deviant, lifestyle.

Why do conservatives use this constellation of words and phrases in arguing for political policies and exactly how do they use them? Exactly what unifies this collection, what forms it into a single constellation? A solution to the worldview problem must answer all these questions and more. It must explain why conservatives choose to talk about the topics they do, why they choose the words they do, why those words mean what they do to them, and how their reasoning makes sense to them. Every conservative speech or book or article is a challenge to any would-be description of the conservative worldview.

The same, of course, is true of the liberal worldview. Liberals, in their speeches and writings, choose different topics, different words, and different modes of inference than conservatives. Liberals talk about: social forces, social responsibility, free expression, human rights, equal rights, concern, care, help, health, safety, nutrition, basic human dignity, oppression, diversity, deprivation, alienation, big corporations, corporate welfare, ecology, ecosystem, biodiversity, pollution, and so on. Conservatives tend not to dwell on these topics, or to use these words as part of their normal political discourse. A description of the liberal and conservative worldviews should explain why.

As I mentioned above, conservatism and liberalism are not monolithic. There will not be a single conservative or liberal worldview to fit all conservatives or all liberals. Conservatism and liberalism are radial categories. They have, I believe, central models and variations on those models. I take as my goal the description of the central models and the descriptions of the major variations on those central models.

The principal goal of this book is to describe the conservative and liberal worldviews with enough detail and accuracy to meet all the adequacy conditions we have just discussed. What I have found is that conservatives have a deeper insight into their worldview than liberals have into theirs. Conservatives talk constantly about the centrality of morality and the family in their politics, while liberals did not talk about these things until conservatives started winning elections by doing so. My findings indicate that the family and morality are central to both worldviews. But where conservatives are relatively aware of how their politics relates to their views of family life and morality, liberals are less aware of the implicit view of morality and the family that organizes their own political beliefs. This lack of conscious awareness of their own political worldview has been devastating to the liberal cause.

Of course, any adequate theory of political worldview in terms will have to account as precisely as possible for relationship between views of the family and morality on one hand and public policy on the other. I shall focus initially on conservative public policy and return later to liberal public policy. I also want, as well as I can, to understand the relationship between morality and political ideology. For example, to answer such questions as why conservatives do not use the ideas of social forces and class in their explanations and why liberals do; or why conservatives tend to prefer nature over nurture, why they tend to like books like *The Bell Curve*, while liberals prefer nurture over nature in their explanations.

In addition, I have found our public discourse about the nature of morality and its relation to politics to be sadly impoverished. We *must* find a way to talk about alternative

moral systems and how they give rise to alternative forms of politics. Journalists—including the most intelligent and insightful of journalists—have been at a loss. They have to rely on existing forms of public discourse, and since those forms are not adequate to the task, even the most thoughtful and honest journalists need help. Public discourse has to be enriched so that the media can do its job better. I see this book as a step in the process of expanding our public discourse on the relationship between morality, politics, and family life. A major part of this effort is bringing to public discourse certain important ideas from the study of the mind. It is important that the public become aware that we think by using conceptual systems that are not immediately accessible to consciousness and that conceptual metaphor is part of our normal thought processes.

To date, I have found only one pair of models for conservative and liberal worldviews that meets all three adequacy," conditions, a pair that (1) explains why certain stands on issues go together (e.g., gun control goes with social programs goes with pro-choice goes with environmentalism); (2) explains why the puzzles for liberals are not puzzles for conservatives, and conversely; and (3) explains topic choice, word choice, and forms of reasoning in conservative and liberal discourse. Those worldviews center on two opposing models of the family.

At the center of the conservative worldview is a Strict Father model.

This model posits a traditional nuclear family, with the father having primary responsibility for supporting and protecting the family as well as the authority to set overall policy, to set strict rules for the behavior of children, and to enforce the rules. The mother has the day-to-day responsibility for the care of the house, raising the children, and upholding the father's authority. Children must respect and obey their parents; by doing so they build character, that is, self-discipline and self-reliance. Love and nurturance are, of course, a vital part of family life but can never outweigh parental authority, which is itself an expression of love and nurturance—tough love. Self-discipline, self-reliance, and respect for legitimate authority are the crucial things that children must learn.

Once children are mature, they are on their own and must depend on their acquired self-discipline to survive. Their self-reliance gives them authority over their own destinies, and parents are not to meddle in their lives.

The liberal worldview centers on a very different ideal of family life, the Nurturant Parent model:

Love, empathy, and nurturance are primary, and children become responsible, self-disciplined and 'self-reliant through being cared for, respected, and caring for others, both in their family and in their community. Support and protection are part of nurturance, and they require strength and courage on the part of parents. The obedience of children comes out of their love and respect for their parents and their community, not out of the fear of punishment. Good communication is crucial. If their authority is to be legitimate, parents must explain why their decisions serve the cause of protection and nurturance. Questioning by children is seen as positive, since children need to learn why their parents do what they do and since children often have good ideas that should be taken seriously. Ultimately, of course, responsible parents have to make the decisions, and that must be clear.

The principal goal of nurturance is for children to be fulfilled and happy in their lives. A fulfilling life is assumed to be, in significant part, a nurturant life—one committed to family and community responsibility. What children need to learn most is empathy for others, the capacity for nurturance, and the maintenance of social ties, which cannot be done without the strength, respect, self-discipline, and self-reliance that comes through being cared for. Raising a child to be fulfilled also requires helping that child develop his or her potential for achievement and enjoyment. That requires respecting the child's own values and allowing the child to explore the range of ideas and options that the world offers.

When children are respected, nurtured, and communicated with from birth, they gradually enter into a lifetime relationship of mutual respect, communication, and caring with their parents.

Each model of the family induces a set of moral priorities. As we shall see below, these systems use the same moral principles but give them opposing priorities. The resulting moral systems, put together out of the same elements, but in different order, are radically opposed. Strict Father morality assigns highest priorities to such things as moral strength (the self-control and self-discipline to stand up to external and internal evils), respect for and obedience to authority, the setting and following of strict guidelines and behavioral norms, and so on. Moral self-interest says that if everyone is free to pursue their self-interest, the overall self-interests of all will be maximized. In conservatism, the pursuit of self-interest is seen as a way of using self-discipline to achieve self-reliance.

Nurturant Parent morality has a different set of priorities. Moral nurturance requires

empathy for others and the helping of those who need help. To help others, one must take care of oneself and nurture social ties. And one must be happy and fulfilled in oneself, or one will have little empathy for others. The moral pursuit of self-interest only makes sense within these priorities.

The moral principles that have priority in each model appear in the other model, but with lesser priorities. Those lesser priorities drastically change the effect of those principles. For example, moral strength appears in the nurturance model, but it functions not for its own sake, but rather in the service of nurturance. Moral authority, in the nurturance model, functions as a consequence of nurturance. Moral guidelines are defined by empathy and nurturance. Similarly, in the Strict Father model, empathy and nurturance are present and important, but they never override authority and moral strength. Indeed, authority and strength are seen as expressions of nurturance.

What we have here are two different forms of family-based morality. What links them to politics is a common understanding of the nation as a family, with the government as parent. Thus, it is natural for liberals to see it as the function of the government to help people in need and hence to support social programs, while it is equally natural for conservatives to see the function of the government as requiring citizens to be self-disciplined and self-reliant and, therefore, to help themselves.

This is just a mere hint of the analysis of the conservative and liberal worldviews. The details of the family models and the moral systems are far more complex and subtle and, correspondingly, so are the details of the political analysis. This overview is also too brief to discuss variations on the conservative and liberal positions. The full-blown analysis requires a lot more, beginning with a detailed account of our moral conceptual system.

### **Hidden versus Overt, Descriptive versus Prescriptive**

Before proceeding, it is crucial to put aside two common misunderstandings. The first is that many people believe that they are consciously aware of their own worldviews and that all one has to do to find out about people's views of the world is to ask them. Perhaps the most fundamental result of cognitive science is that this is not true. What people will tell you about their worldview does not necessarily accurately reflect how they reason, how they categorize, how they speak, and how they act. For this reason, someone studying political worldviews must establish adequacy conditions for an analysis, just as we have done. As we shall see, the kinds of things that conservatives and liberals say about their political worldviews do not meet these conditions of adequacy. If you ask a liberal about his political worldview, he will almost certainly talk about liberty

and equality, rather than about a nurturant parent model of the family. But as we will see, such directly political ideas do not meet our adequacy conditions; they do not explain why the various liberal stands fit together, nor do they answer the puzzles or account for topic choice, language choice, and modes of reason. Where just asking people fails, as it usually does, the cognitive scientist turns to model-building, as I have in this book. The idea is to construct a model of unconscious political worldviews that will meet those adequacy conditions as closely as possible.

A second common misconception confuses description with prescription. The models we are discussing are descriptive, not prescriptive. They are attempts to describe what people's actual unconscious worldviews are, not what they should be. Most theories of liberalism and conservatism are not concerned with description but with prescription. For example, John Rawls's celebrated theory of liberalism is not an empirical descriptive study but an attempt to characterize a prescriptive theory of justice, from which liberalism follows. As a descriptive account of actual liberal political stands on issues, it is a failure, as we shall see. My job here is to describe how people do make sense of their politics, not how they should.

The same goes for the account of morality that I am about give. I am interested not in what morality should be, but our very notions of what is moral are built into our unconscious conceptual systems.