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Framing: The Role of the Brain in Politics

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Progressives, both in America and in Europe, tend to be materialists. They are primarily concerned with the material well-being of citizens in general — with their safety, their jobs, their wealth, their health, education that brings wealth, environmental preservation, and so on. These are real and vital concerns.

But progressive materialists are not materialist enough. The brain is material. Every thought is physical in two ways. First, it uses neural circuitry; every idea is constituted by the activation of physical circuitry in the brain. Second, the content of thought is grounded in the way the brain is linked to the body.

These are basic results in the brain cognitive sciences. But all too often, progressive materialists have learned an outmoded and false view of reason that gets in the way of their understanding of politics. It is a view made popular in the Enlightenment.

Enlightenment Reason and Classical Rationality have been shown over and over in the cognitive and brain sciences to be false in just about every respect. Yet they are still being taught and used throughout the academic world and in progressive policy circles. Real human reason is very different.

Here are the claims of enlightenment reason, and the material realities:

- Claim: Thought is conscious. But neuroscience shows that thought is about 98 percent unconscious.
- Claim: Reason is abstract and independent of the body. But reason is embodied in two ways: (1) we think with our brains and (2) thought is grounded in the sensory-motor system.
- Claim: Reason can fit the world directly. Yet because we think with a brain structured by the body, reason is constrained by what the brain and body allow.
- Claim: Reason uses formal logic. In reality, reason is frame-based and very largely metaphorical. Basic metaphors arise naturally around the world due to common experiences and the nature of neural learning. The literature on Embodied cognition has experimentally verified the reality of metaphorical thought.

Real human reason uses frame-based and metaphor-based logics. Behavioral economics is based on this fact.

- Claim: Emotion gets in the way of reason. Actually, real reason requires emotion. Brain-damaged patients who cannot feel emotion don't know what to want, since like and not like mean nothing to them and they cannot judge the emotions of others. As a result they cannot make rational decisions.
- Claim: Reason is universal. Actually, even conservatives and progressives reason differently, and evidence is pouring in that one's native language affects how one reasons.
- Claim: Language is neutral, and can fit the world directly. Actually language is defined in terms of conceptual frames and metaphors, works through the brain and does not fit the world directly. Indeed, many of the concepts named by words (e.g. freedom) are essentially contested and have meanings that vary with value systems.
- Claim: Mathematics exists objectively and structures the universe. Mathematics has actually been created by mathematicians using their human brains, with frames and metaphors."
- Claim: Reason serves self-interest. Partly true of course, but to a very large extent reason is based on empathetic connections to others, which works via the mirror neuron systems in our brains.

Real reason — the brain mechanism that human beings use to reason with — defines what rationality really is, and characterizes the inferences that real people use.

But much of progressive thought is still tied to enlightenment reason, which claims that if you just tell people the facts about their material interests, they will reason to the right conclusion, since reason is supposed to be universal, logical, and based on self-interest. Marketers have a better sense of how reason really works, and conservatives, many of whom have business backgrounds, have been better at marketing their ideas. Because of this discrepancy, the scientific fallacy of enlightenment reason has thus had major negative real-world effects.

American politics is governed by two moral worldviews that are related via metaphorical thought to common and contrasting moral worldviews of ideal family life: Strict Father (based on the metaphor of morality as obedience), and Nurturant parent (based on the metaphor of morality as care). Each family model has a logic that is projected onto politics via the metaphor that a governing institution is family.

It is important to recognize that both moral worldviews often occur in the same brain. They are characterized by different neural circuits that apply to different issues. Thus, one can be conservative on religious views and progressive on welfare issues, or conservative on military policy and progressive on domestic issues. Both neural circuits can co-exist in a single brain even though they are mutually contradictory, because brains contain mutually inhibitory circuitry. Thus the activation of one inhibits that activation of the other, and the more one is activated the weaker the other gets. When this occurs on a significant scale, we call such people "bi-conceptual" — they have two mutually inhibitory moral worldviews. This is commonplace.

In America, the bi-conceptuals are misleadingly called either "moderates," or "independents," or "swing voters." They are especially susceptible to effective communication. Because words are defined relative to frames, and frames occur in morally-based systems of thought, the effective repetition of frames from one worldview can strengthen that worldview. In America, conservatives have a much better communication system than progressives and are better at framing. When progressives accept enlightenment rationality, they often make two mistakes: They talk in terms of policy alone, not in terms of the morality that lies behind the politics; and they don't understand how biconceptualism works. They will "move to the right" — adopting some conservative language and in policies. The result will be to help conservatives by activating the conservative worldview in the brains of the significant number of bi-conceptuals. Both of these mistakes were made by the Obama administration in 2009 and 2010, and they led to the conservative victory in 2010. Obama did not make such mistakes in his presidential campaign on 2008 and he won.

In America, this phenomenon has a feedback effect due to polling and the way progressives interpret polls. Polls often make use of language that is not neutral, but has come to have a conservative meaning because of how they have been repeated over and over in conservative discourse, language like "government spending," "deficit reduction," "tax relief," "judicial activism," and so on. These are code words for extreme conservative policies. When biconceptuals react favorably to these words, which they have heard repeated over and over in favorable contexts, progressive leaders will assume that this reflects "public opinion," even though the public rejects the conservative policies that these are code words for. Progressives will wind up using these words as well and adopting conservative policies, thus helping their opposition and going against policies that would be rejected by bi-conceptuals if they were described more accurately. Just

correcting conservatives when they lie or get the facts wrong is not sufficient. The illusion that it is comes from enlightenment reason.

What does all of this have to do with European politics? Here is my best guess.

Multi-party European democracies are a reflection of bi-conceptualism — different mixtures of conservative and progressive values. At the EAPC conference in May 2101, it was widely pointed out that American strategists and communication professionals have been hired by European conservative parties. The result is that European bi-conceptuals are more exposed to conservative moral language, which activates the conservative moral worldview in their brains, and so leads them to support more conservative policies and vote more for conservative candidates. This effect, in absence of a progressive counterforce makes the effect stronger and stronger.

In June of 2009, I had the pleasure of addressing the communications team of the German Social-Democratic Party — about 50 people. We talked for five hours. It took a long time for them understand that results about the brain contradicted their traditional mode of thought. By the end, a majority had begun to understand. One stood up and said, “Our leaders will never understand. They have spent their whole careers on policy and not communication.”

But that reaction too is a misunderstanding, as if framing had to do solely with communication. Framing is how we normally understand what we are doing. To understand framing is to understand how the brain works. All politics is moral. Every political leader proposing policies puts them forth as being right not wrong. The problem is that different political leaders have different ideas of what “right” is. That hat, they have different moral worldviews on different issues. To understand framing is to understand the moral worldview behind each given position on each issue — both your own and that of your opposition.

Effective framing is thus the opposite of “spin.” “Spin” is the deceptive use of framing to avoid political embarrassment or to politically embarrass the opposition. The effective use of framing is using language to get across what you really believe — the moral basis of your political position, the position itself presented in clear moral terms, and the facts that support that position in language that the public can relate to (not policy-speak). The morally-based language must be repeated long-term.

Let’s get down to details.

The Conservative World View

The Strict Father Family:

It is assumed that world is, and always will be, a dangerous and difficult place, that there is tangible evil in the world, that children are naturally bad and have to be made good. In order to stand up to evil, one must be morally strong — disciplined. Moral weakness, and the promotion of it, is immoral.

The father's job is to protect and support the family. He is the ultimate moral authority, and his children are to respect and obey him and speak when spoken to. His moral duty is to teach his children right from wrong (there are rules that make the clear distinction) by physically punishing them when they do wrong. He must never give up his authority. It is assumed that physical discipline in childhood will develop the internal discipline adults need to be moral people and to succeed. This is called "tough love." The child's duty is to obey. Punishment is required to balance the moral books; only punishment works. If you do wrong, there must be a consequence.

The mother is in the background, not being strong enough to protect and support the family or fully discipline the children. Her job is to uphold the authority of the father, and to care for and comfort the children. As a "mommy," she tends to be overly soft-hearted and might well coddle or spoil the child. The father must make sure this does not happen, lest the children become dependent.

Children are to become self-reliant through discipline and the pursuit of self-interest. Those who succeed at this are "the good people." Pursuit of self-interest is moral: If everybody pursues their own self-interest, then the self-interest of all will be maximized. (This is a form of Adam Smith's economics: If everybody pursues his own profit, the profit of all will be maximized.)

Competition is necessary for a moral world; without it, people would not have to develop discipline and so would not become moral beings. Worldly success is an indicator of sufficient moral strength; lack of success suggests lack of sufficient discipline.

When children are mature, they should be able to make it on their own and parents are not to *meddle* in their lives. Those who are not successful should not be coddled, but should be forced to become more disciplined on their own.

The strict father, as moral authority, is responsible for controlling the women in the family — especially their sexuality and reproductive decisions.

Strict Father Morality:

Human nature: People naturally seek self-interest. This is right and good.

State of the World: Chaotic; Fearful; Evil is a Major Force; Competition is necessary. There will necessarily be winners and losers.

The Moral Order: Those who are moral should be in power. Traditional power relations are a guide to morality: God above man; Man above Nature; Adults above Children; Western Culture above Non-western culture; America above other nations. (There are also bigoted versions: Straights above gays; Christians above non-Christians; Men above women; White above nonwhites.)

Strict Moralist: Knows right from wrong. Is moral authority, commands obedience and respect, and does not yield his authority: the moral should be the powerful, and moral authority preserved; Has duty to protect, support, and impose moral views; Is Disciplined; Has duty to punish and impose discipline; Controls information and discourse; Must stand up to Evil, and fight fire with fire.

Good person: Uses discipline to pursue self-interest to become self-reliant.

Freedom: The right to pursue one's own well-being without interference. Dependency is immoral. Competition imposes discipline. The undisciplined will be weak and poor, and deservedly so.

Highest Value: Support, preserve, defend, and extend the moral system itself.

Conservative Politics

When translated into politics, the government becomes the strict father whose job for the country is to support (maximize overall wealth) and protect (maximize military and political strength). The citizens are children of two kinds: the mature, disciplined, and self-reliant ones, who should one should not meddle with; and the whining, undisciplined, dependent ones who should never be coddled.

This means (among other things) favoring those who control corporate wealth and power, who are seen as the best people, over those who are victims, who are seen as morally weak. It also favors removing government regulations, which get in the way of those who are disciplined and seeking their self-interest so as to become self-reliant. Nature is seen as a resource to be exploited, and environmentalism gets I the way of this. One-way communication translates into government secrecy. The highest moral value in strict morality is to preserve and extend the domain of strict morality itself, which translates into bringing the values of strict father morality into every aspect of life, both public and private, domestic and foreign.

The role of government is (a) to protect the country and its interests, and (b) to promote maximally unimpeded economic activity; (c) maintain order and discipline.

Explanations

The radical “conservative” politics that we see today is an expression of strict father morality. Conservative policies are an expression of this worldview. Social programs are immoral and to be eliminated in favor of forcing people to be disciplined and self-reliant. The wealthy elite (disciplined and self-reliant) are “the good people” and are to be rewarded. Taxes are afflictions and punishments for being a good person — being disciplined and self-reliant. They should be minimized. America is the main moral authority in the world, and should not surrender any of its sovereignty. Banning abortion, getting rid of sex education, and restricting access to women’s reproductive health facilities

The Progressive World View

The Nurturant Parent Family:

It is assumed that the world *should be* a nurturant place, and that children are born good and should be kept that way. Both parents (if there are two) are equally responsible for running the household and raising the children. Their job is to nurture their children and raise their children to be nurturers. To be a nurturer you have to be (1) *empathetic*, and (2) *responsible* (for yourself and others). Empathy and responsibility are the core ideas, with many consequences: Responsibility implies protection, strength, competence, education, hard work, and social connectedness. Empathy requires (a) fairness, honesty, and trust, (b) freedom and opportunity, (c) open, two way communication, (d) a happy, fulfilled life (unhappy, unfulfilled people are less like to want others to be happy), and (e) restitution rather than retribution to balance the moral books. Social responsibility requires cooperation over competition, and community building. In the place of specific strict rules, there is a general *ethics of care* that says: *Help, Don't Harm*. To be of good character is to be empathetic and responsible, in all the above ways.

Progressive Morality:

Human nature: Both empathy and self-interest arise naturally. Empathy needs to be cultivated, responsibility is needed to carry out and moderate both empathy and self-interest.

State of the World: The world has nurtured us, and we want it to continue doing so.

Nurturant Moralists: Is empathetic and responsible for self and others. Helps, doesn't harm. Is strong and protective. Recognizes interdependence. Promotes nurturance in others and in society: Empathy, responsibility, protectiveness, strength, fairness, cooperation, openness, competence, happiness, restitution, mutual respect.

Progressive Politics: Progressive politics is a morality based around empathy and responsibility — responsibility for oneself and social responsibility. The job of government is to care for and protect the population, especially those who are helpless, to guarantee democracy (the equal sharing of political power), to promote the well-being of all, and to insure fairness for all. This requires the strength to carry out all

the above. The economy should be a means these moral ends. There should be openness in government. Nature is seen as a source of nurture to be respected and preserved. Empathy and responsibility are to be promoted in every area of life, public and private. Art and education are part of self-fulfillment and therefore are moral necessities.

Types of Progressives

From a sociological or political perspective, there seem to be dozens, if not hundreds of types of progressives. But from a cognitive perspective, defined by modes of thought, there are about five:

1. Socio-economic progressives: All issues are ultimately matters of money and class.
2. Identity-politics progressives: Our oppressed group deserves its full rights now!
3. Enviros: Think sustainability, the sanctity of nature, and the rights of native peoples.
4. Civil libertarians: Issues of freedom, liberty, democracy (equal sharing of power) and individual rights are paramount.
5. Anti-authoritarians: Mercenary big corporations and other illegitimate forms of power need to be fought against and overcome.

There are different attitudes one can take toward these positions. An ideological attitude: no compromise. A pragmatic attitude: Compromise to maximize gains and minimize losses.

Bi-conceptualism means having both general moral systems applied to different domains of life.

As an example, let's consider Germany, which has five parties: the SPD consists of compromising socio-economic progressives. The Greens have both compromising ("realos") and noncompromising ("fundis") progressives; and Die Linke are no-compromise anti-authoritarians; the CDU is pragmatically conservative, compromising on socio-economic policy as little as needed to get elected; the FDP is an uncompromising economic conservative party.

How such parties think and talk is a reflection of their dominant moral views, to a large extent, how conservative and progressive moral views are distributed.

Here are some examples, seen from a progressive perspective.

- Democracy is based on empathy, on citizens caring about each other, taking responsibility to act on that empathy, and making themselves better so as to make life better for both themselves and others. Without empathy, democracy would not have principles like freedom and fairness for all, not just the powerful.

Conservatives act as if democracy created a battlefield pitting all against all, as if freedom had no responsibility toward others but only the unfettered ability to maximize your own interests and authority as opposed to those of others.

- Pensions are deferred payments for work done earlier. Pensions are earned. And if companies or governments have no money for pensions, it is because they did not put aside sufficient funds for those deferred payments.

Conservatives have been speaking of public pensions as if pensions were pay for not working.

- In wealthy countries, immigrants most often do hard work for very low pay making possible the lifestyles of non-immigrants. For such contributions, they deserve gratitude and respect from those whose higher lifestyles they make possible, as well as basic needs for themselves and their families — health care, housing, and education for their children.

Conservatives speak of immigrants as if they were thieves and low-lives, immoral people who are burdens on society undeserving of anything.

- Democratic governments have a moral mission: to protect and empower all citizens equally. That means maximizing access to the necessities of life: safety, enough to live on, housing, health and education, jobs. These are necessities, not “services.” Services are not moral in nature. They can be provided by service industries for private profit. But when it comes to necessities, private profit is money wasted, that is, not spent to provide those necessities.

Conservatives see the provision of necessities as occasions for even greater private profit, because people cannot do without them. They see government as a way to maximize private profit.

- Education is necessary to develop the abilities of all citizens, to teach them about the world and the responsibilities of citizenship, and to qualify them for well-paying jobs. Society as a

whole benefits from an educated citizenry. Students are social goods. Society as whole should therefore be paying for education.

For conservatives, education is private good, primary providing job training, and so students should be paying for their own educations and government subsidies should be eliminated.

We could go on and on, but I think you get the idea. Enlightenment reason has been a disaster for progressive moral views. Knowing how the brain works matters a great deal. Using that knowledge along with media domination has been effective for conservatives. Unless progressive leaders can educate themselves about the basic results of the cognitive and brain sciences, the international conservative movement will become dominant almost everywhere