

L 4. MORAL POLITICS: How Liberals and Conservatives Think by George Lakoff

This is now, in my judgment, the most important book I have ever read, even more important than Goleman's EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE of which I once said the same thing.

Its theses are (1) that conservatives are winning politically using a better funded, oversimplified & appealing moral system than liberals present, (2) that liberals & conservatives do not understand each other's moral politics, and so attacks on each other are misguided, (3) that conservatives carry their strict male discipline morality over into politics, while liberals use a nurturant parent morality. He says we combine discipline & nurturing in child rearing, but contends one often dominates & infuses politics, & that research evidence so far supports the nurturant against the strict discipline for child rearing. He also defends the liberal position politically.

Lakoff is professionally a cognitive linguist. As such, he contends that we all necessarily think and speak metaphorically and use common central categories. The book is couched in a cognitive linguistic framework & language. It would have been more readable for most people without the academic language. The books contentions are all very important indeed and could be defended with less technical language. Most readers should get whatever they can from a quick reading of the first chapter which presents the cognitive linguistic framework, but go on reading what is really important in the rest of the book even if the academese in chapter 1. is not clear.

This reviewer should make clear his own position in reviewing a book dealing with political conservatism and liberalism. It is that people who lock themselves into a conservative, liberal or radical ideological position on every issue are not really thinking clearly. Everyone needs to be conservative in many respects, liberal in dealing with some political controversies, and even radical in a few cases. The book does not deal with radical political positions. Most things about our country need to be preserved as is, a lot needs some changes in it, and a few changes need to be big (radical) not small.

Political conservatives and liberals will be enlightened to find out why Lakoff thinks their attacks on each other seldom hit their mark and can be dismissed by the opposition attacked. I for one could never understand this. It sounds as though Lakoff may be right. Maybe both need to understand the moral positions of the other instead of charging each other of self-interest motivation alone. Lakoff contends that moral issues outweigh self-interest for both in politics, & that people's primary moral interests inevitably dominate politics. He even cites critical cases that appear to prove his point. The problem created for democracy he does not resolve.

Before I discuss that, I will briefly summarize my thoughts on child rearing & suggest that three other outlooks dominate our politics, not these two, & only one of the three is compatible with democracy.

First my view of child rearing. At birth, a baby is totally dependent upon nurturing by someone whose primary concern is the well-being of the baby. It takes time for the baby to develop self-consciousness, distinguishing its body & its feeling from that outside it, & distinguishing people from objects. Slowly a will develops and the baby has wants, without knowing what will hurt it and what it needs. At the point that it can crawl to try to get what it wants, parental discipline enters to protect it. For some time both nurturing and parental authority need to be balanced according to the child's situation, and come adolescence parents need to relax authoritative control while still nurturing. Normally with full adulthood, individuals make their own decisions as to what is good for them and for others, but are subject to community and governmental restrictions. I still wonder whether either discipline or nurturing are as basic to politics as Lakoff contends.

It seems to me that there are three types of morality found at both levels. There is individualistic morality, authoritarian morality, and responsibility morality.

An individualistic morality differs only in how individualistic it is. In less extreme form it seeks to minimize social and governmental restraints upon individuals on the ground that they only interfere with freedom, that freedom is itself a great good and is instrumental in furthering good even for others. Today many people calling themselves conservatives of many kinds hold such a philosophy. For many its main objective now is to deregulate business, using the slogan "get government off people's backs". (This arose as old fashioned liberalism, favoring economic laissez-faire when that was needed to remove unwise government regulations that were preventing free enterprise from becoming more innovative and productive. Many economists still support what they still call liberal trade policies.) Theoretically a free market economy now gives everyone opportunities to be successful. In practice it turns democracies into plutocracies. (Whether strict discipline child rearing contributes to this (or dominates this as Lakoff claims), I don't know.) One form of individualistic morality is libertarianism or philosophical anarchism. Individual adults can be trusted to do what is right to produce a well working society. In individualistic morality's most extreme form, right is what the individual says it is. Morality is purely subjective.

In none of its forms is this individualistic morality a conservative philosophy in the sense that conservative means to try to conserve and maintain the important values already achieved by civilizations.

An authoritarian morality is that of theocrats, other totalitarians, all dictators, and fundamentalists of all religions. When based on religion, one can think of God as providing the strict discipline that must be followed without question because it is good for us as his children, and we will be rewarded or punished according to our behavior. Theocracy is the most extreme, because it can justify forbidding questioning. If not religious, it is just power asserting its power as authority. (I think it not unlikely that strict discipline child rearing ideas would feed into authoritarianism.)

Finally, responsibility morality accepts as the basic moral principle that everyone is a member of human society that has nurtured us (well or poorly in various degrees), has provided us with much knowledge from the past (right & wrong to various degrees), and upon which we all depend greatly at present, so that we in turn have responsibility: to refrain from harming others, to develop our own & all others fine potentialities, to harmonize our creativities with that of others & with the environment, & to promote others well-being, especially that of those in need, all of these insofar as possible. (This relates more to child nurturing than to strict discipline, but whether it comes from that I doubt.) It harmonizes our innate individualism with that of others, and it leads to what is loosely termed liberalism politically--using government to meet human needs (something toward which political derision is never morally justifiable). It alone of the three is consistent with democracy.

Even if practiced conscientiously, the responsibility morality is not alone good enough because it uses only individual efforts and the existent social structures to relieve suffering and meet human needs, but that does nothing to prevent the suffering and the injustices that are inherent in the existent social structures. Such systemic injustices require changes in the existent social structures and the development of social systems that do not create injustices requiring relief. Democracy is at best a system to limit arbitrary & unjust use of political power which otherwise would be most likely. So far even democracies have failed miserably to limit the arbitrary and unjust use sometimes made of economic power; the sensitive consciences of some economic power holders evidently is not enough to tame & control in the public interest the economic power of others.

The various moralities discussed above were presented as intellectual conceptions, but the emotional basis of all morality is human empathy in the face of the suffering of others (even of animals). That is as natural to all humans as is their egoism, though most of their human empathy can be eclipsed by mistreatment rather than nurturing concern of others at important points in a person's life. Some people become indifferent & amoral as a result & a few take pride in immoral behavior.

Lakeoff & I recognize there is a problem for a pluralistic democracy if politics involves people with 2 or 3 incompatible moral philosophies that are strongly held. He does not resolve the problem, but I must. If the constitution has a Bill of Rights to limit government power and people respect that, minorities cannot be crushed by majority mob rule. If there is a homogeneous area in terms of any philosophy, it could apply its philosophy within the area. With that possible exception, compromises will have to be found at least such that no one's objective well-being is prevented by government action. Some types of government action to help the needy, or to protect the environment, or to regulate business in the public interest need not harm people's objective well-being. There are even now in this country many leading business people who would support such government action. And there could be no legitimate objection to restraining & preventing action by individuals or groups to harm the objective well-being of others. So government would not be rendered helpless, though no one philosophy would have full swing to impose its will on minorities. Democracy could work, but could not do as well as it might if a philosophy compatible with democracy had no different philosophies within it. But it is the form of government best suited for pluralism of most sorts. The major danger to continuance of democracy can arise if any minority is allowed to develop its own armed militia, as small armed & trained forces could pull off a violent coup unexpectedly sometime and overthrow a democratic government.

If a democracy has generally strong support in principle and no minorities strongly opposed in principle, there should be enough support in principle to get people with different political philosophies to compromise their proposals enough to make democracy work. Political scientists call this a constitutional consensus such that those with clashing views are willing to lose on any issue by compromise rather than resort to violence to have their way and try to force it on others. This is the attitude or spirit necessary to make democracy work with strongly held pluralistic political views.