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Understanding the Mind is Necessary to Understanding Politics

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My two recent books, *Whose Freedom?* and *Thinking Points* raise real issues that go undiscussed by Steven Pinker. Here are some of those issues.

- Is freedom, as I claim, an essentially contested concept that has a restricted common core and at least two opposing progressive and conservative extensions?
- Are conservatives changing the traditional concepts of freedom and liberty to their own purposes?
- In *Moral Politics* I argued that the central ideas of progressive and right-wing politics can best be made sense of as metaphorical versions of progressive and conservative family models. Do the 500 pages of argumentation in *Moral Politics* make the case convincingly?
- Is my biconceptual hypothesis correct: Americans grow up with both strict and nurturant family-based models of morality and politics? Is it the case that about 1/3 of our population uses both models, but in different areas of life (e.g., domestic vs. foreign policy)?
- Is the claim correct in *Thinking Points* that there is no such thing as a coherent “centrist” or “moderate” worldview?
- Is conservative populism—as I describe it in *Whose Freedom?*—a cultural movement based on (1) strict father morality, (2) reasoning based on individual responsibility alone and hence on direct causation, and (3) a coordinated campaign to make poor and middle-class conservatives think that they are being oppressed by liberals? Is this why those conservatives vote against their economic self-interest? And does its cultural nature rule out the possibility of a purely economic populism?
- Is the root difference between fundamentalist versus progressive Christianity a difference in the central metaphor for God — a strict parent (reward in Heaven, punishment for sin) vs. a nurturant parent (offering unconditional love and grace, while pointing the way toward empathy and responsibility). Does this explain why fundamentalist Christians tend to have right-wing values?
- Is my characterization of the “myth of the free market” in both books correct?
- Am I right that people vote primarily on values, authenticity, trust, communication, and identity and that issues are only symbolic of values and trust?
- Does conservative dominance of political discourse arise from their 35 years of getting their deep frames (worldview, values, and

principles) into public discourse? With deep frames in place, it is easier for them to coin effective slogans that fit those deep frames. Progressives, who have not gotten their deep frames out there, face a difficult time finding effective slogans with only surface frames.

- How does the conception of the “common good” that I offer in both books compare with that offered by Michael Tomasky and John Halpin?

I speak of “putting together the common wealth for the common good to build an infrastructure that helps everyone achieve their individual goods.” You can’t make it in business with using that infrastructure: the public highways, the internet, the communication satellite system, the banking system, the SEC-regulated stock market, the courts (most for corporate law), the educational system (to educate the workforce), the police and fire departments, and the public health system (to protect the food supply and prevent widespread disease).

In addition, there’s the “commons” — what we all own — national parks, the rivers and oceans and aquifers, the beaches, the air, the airwaves, and so on. There is no such thing as a self-made man or woman. The individual good requires the common good. It is not a matter of either the common good or individual goods, but both.

From reading Pinker, you would hardly know that *Whose Freedom?* raised deep and important questions and made serious, concrete proposals.

With respect to cognitive science, there is a grand issue — the one Pinker and I are on opposite sides of:

- Can you comprehend 21st century politics with a 17th century view of the mind?

The old view was “disembodied universal reason” and it has been brought into the 21st century with the following “old view” properties, each of which we know to be false from cognitive science.

- *The old view:* All thought is conscious.
- *The new view:* Most thought is below the level of consciousness.

- *The old view:* Thought is disembodied.
- *The new view:* Thought is embodied in three ways: (1) it is physical, occurring in neural structure of the brain; (2) it makes use of embodied experience — motor movement, vision, emotionality, empathy, social interaction, and the ways our brains structure space and events; (3) primary metaphors, which we learn just by

functioning in the world in situations where two different parts of the brain are regularly activated by real-world experiences and neural circuitry forms linking those distinct areas and physically constituting a metaphor.

- *The old view*: Thought looks like formal logic — with predicates, propositions, classical negation, conjunction, disjunction, if-then, quantifiers, and classical categories defined by necessary and sufficient conditions. Other logics are often included: modal logics, probabilistic logics, the rational actor model, and so on.
 - *The new view*: Thought really works via the brain, in which certain structures commonly arise: frames, prototypes, conceptual metaphors, image-schemas, executing schemas, mental simulations, neural bindings, and so on.
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- *The old view*: The categories of mind fit the categories inherent in the world.
 - *The new view*: The world exists, and we evolved to function in it, but we can only comprehend it with the mechanisms of our brains — our frames, metaphors, and so on — which allow us to conceptualize the world in many different ways.
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- *The old view*: Language is a matter of words and rules, where the rules are strictly formal and have nothing whatever to do with meaning, communication, context, social interaction, or any aspect of our embodied experience. This is the Chomskyan view, defended by Pinker in various books.
 - *The new view*: Language brings to bear brain mechanisms of various sorts to form constructions — structures that link the sound structure of words and morphemes directly to meanings, context, communicative principles, social interaction, emotion, gesture, and so on. There is no one “language module.” This is the perspective coming from cognitive linguistics and neuroscience.

Why does all this matter for politics? Because politics is centrally about ideas, actions, perceptions, policies, and communication, all of which require an understanding of the mind. From the new view, politics looks very different.

Pinker’s review of *Whose Freedom?* and his reply to my reply are smokescreens that hide these differences. Let’s look behind the smokescreen.

Pinker claims to be “defending” the theory of conceptual metaphor. The only version he cites is the 27-year-old account given by Mark Johnson and myself in *Metaphors*

We Live By. By Philosophy in the Flesh, our 1999 600-page volume that summarized a large portion of the two decades of research since the original work, we discuss the neural theory of metaphor explicitly.

There, carrying out the ideas of our earlier work, we stated Narayanan's theory that metaphorical mappings are neural circuits linking different brain regions. When activated, each metaphor forms an integrated circuit that is activated-all-at-once, not in two stages. Pinker has however mistaken this fundamental idea behind conceptual metaphor, writing "[Lakoff] ignores research by a number of cognitive psychologists showing that many metaphors are accessed directly in terms of their intended meaning, skipping the metaphorical sources, especially when a metaphor is conventional rather than fresh." But this is exactly what the theory predicts.

Pinker ignores the extended discussion in *More Than Cool Reason*, a survey of poetic metaphor by myself and Mark Turner, and in *Philosophy in the Flesh* on the distinction between conventional conceptual metaphorical mappings and dead linguistic metaphors. The conventional ones are the most "alive" — used constantly in thought and language.

I had cited a classic experiment by Lera Boroditsky as one of hundreds of kinds of evidence supporting the theory. Pinker discusses a different experiment on a different topic by Boroditsky which one research team has failed to confirm (not disconfirmed, just failed to confirm). Boroditsky's earlier results stand, as do Gibbs' and those of hundreds of metaphor researchers worldwide.

Pinker is right to say that "metaphor can be a matter of thought and not just language. The question is when and how often." That is why there are 600 pages of examples in *Philosophy in the Flesh* and another 600 pages of examples from mathematics in *Where Mathematics Comes From* — and a good introductory survey of the field by Zoltán Kövecses (Metaphor from Oxford University Press).

Pinker's own unconscious use of conceptual metaphor is especially interesting: "competition in evolutionary science ... is inherent to the very idea of natural selection, where advantageous variants are preserved at the expense of less advantageous ones." Consider a case where green moths in a green leafy environment survive because the birds eat the moths of other colors that they can pick out more easily against the green background. Pinker metaphorically characterizes this as the green moths winning a "competition" with the other moths. Pinker may be competitive and seeking advantage, but the moths are just the color they are and they do or don't survive because they're in the niche they're in.

The metaphor would be harmless if Pinker didn't try to use it in evolutionary psychology to make claims about social life, as in his defense of the idea that women may, for evolutionary reasons, mostly be inferior to men in doing science. Pinker is, however, right when he makes the distinction between two claims: (1) "universal disembodied reason" is not a good theory of how individual people instinctively think, and (2) universal disembodied reason is not a normative ideal that we should collectively strive for in grounding our beliefs and decisions, especially in arenas--like politics and science--that are designed to get at the truth. They are different ideas. The first is clearly shown by cognitive science: people just don't think that way.

But now take Pinker's suggestion that universal disembodied reason is a normative ideal, something worth striving for, something needed to get at the truth. As a normative ideal, universal disembodied reason is (1) impossible and (2) disastrous, even if it were possible.

Why impossible? Because we just don't think that way. Formal logics are inherently meaningless symbolic systems that have to be understood to be used. In understanding them, we bring to them our frames, metaphors, prototypes, and so on. And the formal systems just don't have the right structure to accommodate real cognition.

Why disastrous? Because, in use, such logics commonly impose a radically false view on the world. Take the rational actor model, which is applied in economic theory. We know from the work of Daniel Kahneman that it fails spectacularly when applied to real human economic behavior. Take categories as defined by necessary and sufficient conditions. Real human categories have many types of prototypes, and may be graded or radial (with a center and extensions). In evolutionary biology, Ernst Mayr railed against classical logical categories because they simply didn't fit species. Stephen J. Gould, in his discussion of pheneticist versus cladist classification, pointed out that those contending groups of evolutionary biologists came up with inconsistent categories because they had different criteria for forming categories. Both were scientists and both were right. But the world just doesn't fit univocal logical categories — and you get the science wrong by trying to force the world in the categories of a system of classical logic. (See chapter 12 of *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*.)

Instead, I have called for a “higher rationality” — a mode of reason that both uses real cognition and self-consciously discusses the frames and metaphors we think with, what their effects are, and why they matter.

The old views still hold sway in many places, but the mind as we have come to know it in recent years is far more than just an object of beauty and wonder; it is something we absolutely must know about if we are to make sense of our politics.