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Defending Freedom

By [George Lakoff](#)

For a quarter of a century, Steven Pinker and I have been on opposite sides of major intellectual and scientific divide concerning the nature of language and the mind. Until this review, the divide was confined to the academic world. But, recently, the issue of the nature of mind and language has come into politics in a big way. We can no longer conduct twenty-first-century politics with a seventeenth-century understanding of the mind. The political issues in this country and the world are just too important.

Pinker, a respected professor at Harvard, has been the most articulate spokesman for the old theory. In language, it is Noam Chomsky's claim that language consists in (as Pinker puts it) "an autonomous module of syntactic rules." What this means is that language is just a matter of abstract symbols, having nothing to do with what the symbols mean, how they are used to communicate, how the brain processes thought and language, or any aspect of human experience — cultural or personal. I have been on the other side, providing evidence over many years that all of those considerations enter into language, and recent evidence from the cognitive and neural sciences indicates that language involves bringing all these capacities together. The old view is losing ground as we learn more.

In thinking, the old view comes originally from Rene Descartes's seventeenth-century rationalism. A view of thought as symbolic logic was formalized by Bertrand Russell and Gottlob Frege around the turn of the twentieth century, and a rationalist interpretation was revived by

Chomsky in the 1950s. In that view, thought is a matter of (as Pinker puts it) "old-fashioned ... universal disembodied reason." Here, reason is seen as the manipulation of meaningless symbols, as in symbolic logic. The new view holds that reason is embodied in a nontrivial way. The brain gives rise to thought in the form of conceptual frames, image-schemas, prototypes, conceptual metaphors, and conceptual blends. The process of thinking is not algorithmic symbol manipulation, but rather neural computation, using brain mechanisms. Jerome Feldman's recent MIT Press book, *From Molecule to Metaphor*, discusses such mechanisms. Contrary to Descartes, reason uses these mechanisms, not formal logic. Reason is mostly unconscious, and as Antonio Damasio has written in *Descartes' Error*, rationality requires emotion.

The old view in economics is the rational actor model, where all economic actors are assumed to be acting according to formal logic, including probabilistic logic. Daniel Kahneman won the Nobel Prize in economics for his work with Amos Tversky showing that real people do economic reasoning using frames, prototypes, and metaphors rather than classical logics.

These questions matter in progressive politics, because many progressives were brought up with the old seventeenth-century view of reason that implies that, if you just tell people the facts, they will reason to the right conclusion — since reason is universal. We know from recent elections that this is just false. "Old-fashioned ... universal disembodied reason" also claims that everyone reasons the same way and that differences in worldview don't matter. But anybody tuning in to contemporary talk shows will notice that not everybody reasons the same way and that worldview does matter.

There is another scientific divide that Pinker and I are opposite sides of. Pinker interprets Darwin in a way reminiscent of social Darwinists. He

uses the metaphor of survival as a competition for genetic advantage. He has become one of the principal spokesmen for a form of evolutionary psychology that claims that there are genetic differences between men and women that stem from prehistoric differences in gender roles. This led him to support Lawrence Summers' suggestion that there might be fewer women than men in the sciences because of genetic differences. Luckily, this unfortunate metaphorical interpretation of Darwin has few supporters.

This divide matters, because my cognitive analysis — in *Moral Politics* — of conservative and progressive ideologies in terms of a nation-as-family metaphor is inconsistent with his version of evolutionary psychology. The seriousness of present-day politics in the United States makes these issues more than a simple ivory-tower matter. If I — and other neuroscientists, cognitive scientists, and cognitive linguists — are right, then Pinker is wrong, and vice versa. Pinker is, however, right for raising the issues and bringing these academic research questions into the public eye.

Unfortunately, what passes for a review of my book, *Whose Freedom?*, is actually a vituperative and underhanded attack. You might never guess from the review what the book is about. It is about the fact that freedom is a contested concept, a concept that people necessarily have different versions of, depending on their values. The book is an account of how conservative and progressive ideologies extend a limited common view of freedom in opposite directions to yield two opposed versions of the "same" concept. Pinker's review is based on two rhetorical strategies:

First, he claims that I say the opposite of what I really say. He points out something ridiculous, then ridicules me for saying such a thing. Pinker uses the tactic over and over. Second, he assumes that his old-guard

theory is obviously right and anything else is radical and crazy. He uses the second strategy with his politics as well as his theory of mind. Here are some examples.

Pinker represents the research on conceptual metaphor as follows: "Conceptual metaphor, according to Lakoff, shows that all thought is based on unconscious physical metaphors." I have actually argued the opposite: Chapter twelve of *Metaphors We Live By* discussed the non-metaphorical grounding of conceptual systems. Chapter two of *More Than Cool Reason* begins with a section on "What is not metaphorical." *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things* goes through 373 pages of non-metaphorical conceptual analysis before bringing up examples of metaphorical thought. And Mark Johnson and myself, in *Philosophy in the Flesh* (see chapter three) survey the basic mechanisms of thought, beginning with the non-metaphorical ones — e.g., image-schemas, conceptual frames (sometimes called simply "schemas" in psychology), and various kinds of prototype structures.

Metaphorical thought is based on these extensive and absolutely crucial aspects of non-metaphorical thought. The system of metaphorical thought is extensive, as those cognitive science books show in great detail. Results from other branches of cognitive science demonstrating the reality of unconscious conceptual metaphor are listed in chapter six of *Philosophy in the Flesh*.

Having claimed falsely that I believe that all thought is metaphorical, Pinker then chides me by taking the position I have actually advocated: "Thinking cannot trade in metaphors directly." This is something I have not merely stated but have argued empirically.

Pinker even gets the research in his own field of psychology wrong. "Laboratory experiments show that people don't think about the underlying image when understanding a familiar metaphor, only when

they are faced with a new one." But experiments show exactly the opposite, as Ray Gibbs at UC Santa Cruz and Lera Boroditsky at Stanford (whose work has won her a National Science Foundation Career Award) have dramatically shown.

In addition, Pinker misunderstands the most basic result in contemporary metaphor research: Metaphor is a matter of thought, not just language. The same words can be instances of different conceptual metaphors. To take a familiar example: It's all downhill from here can mean either (1) things will get progressively worse, based on the "Good Is Up, Bad Is Down" metaphor; or (2) things will be easier from now on, based on the metaphor in which action is understood as motion (as in things are moving right along) and easy action is understood in terms of easy (i.e., downhill) motion. The literature in the field is filled with such examples.

One of my persistent themes is that facts are crucial, and that the right system of frames is often required in order to make sense of facts. With a system of frames that is inconsistent with the facts, the frames (which are realized in the brain) will stay in place and the facts will be ignored. That is why framing to reveal truth is so important. Here is what I say in *Don't Think of an Elephant!* (pages 109-110): "Facts are all-important. They are crucial. But they must be framed appropriately if they are to be an effective part of public discourse. We have to know what a fact has to do with moral principles and political principles. We have to frame those facts as effectively and honestly as we can. And honest framing of the facts will entail other frames that can be checked with other facts."

In short, I'm a realist — both about how the mind works and how the world works. Given that the mind works by frames and metaphors, the challenge is to use frames and metaphors a mind to accurately

characterize how the world works. That is what "reframing" is about — correcting frames that distort truths and finding frames that expose them.

But Pinker claims that I say the opposite — that, rather than being a realist, I am a cognitive relativist: "All this belies Lakoff's cognitive relativism, in which mathematics, science, and philosophy are beauty contests between rival frames rather than attempts to characterize the nature of reality. It undermines his tips in the political arena as well. Lakoff tells progressives not to engage conservatives on their own terms, not to present facts or appeal to the truth, and not to pay attention to polls. Instead, they should try to pound new frames and metaphors into voters' brains. Don't worry that this is just spin or propaganda." Again, Pinker suggests that I'm saying the opposite of what I have really said. Here's what I wrote about spin and propaganda (Don't Think of an Elephant!, pages 100-101):

Spin is the manipulative use of a frame. Spin is used when something embarrassing has happened or has been said, and it's an attempt to put an innocent frame on it — that is, to make the embarrassing occurrence sound normal or good.

Propaganda is another manipulative use of framing. Propaganda is an attempt to get the public to adopt a frame that is not true and is known not to be true, for the purpose of gaining or maintaining political control.

The reframing I am suggesting is neither spin nor propaganda. Progressives need to learn to communicate using frames that they really believe, frames that express what their moral views really are. I strongly recommend against any deceptive framing.

One of the findings of cognitive science that is most important for politics is that frames are mental structures that can be either associated with words (the surface frames) or that structure higher-level organizations of knowledge. The surface frames only stick easily when they fit into higher structures, such as the strict father / nurturant parent worldviews that I discuss in great detail in Moral Politics and elsewhere. Here's what I (and my colleagues and the Rockridge Institute) say on page 29 of Thinking Points:

Surface frames are associated with phrases like "war on terror" that both activate and depend critically on deep frames. These are the most basic frames that constitute a moral worldview or a political philosophy. Deep frames define one's overall "common sense." Without deep frames there is nothing for surface frames to hang onto. Slogans do not make sense without the appropriate deep frames in place.

The same basic point is made in my other books applying cognitive science to politics. Again, Pinker claims that I say the opposite: "Cognitive psychology has not shown that people absorb frames through sheer repetition. On the contrary, information is retained when it fits into a person's greater understanding of the subject matter." But that is exactly what I said! The deep frames characterize the "greater understanding of the subject matter"; the surface frames can be "retained" only when they fit the deep frames.

I regularly talk about the fact that Americans typically have both strict and nurturant models in their brains. For example, here is what I say on page 70 of *Whose Freedom?*: "Finally and most important, just about every American has both models engrained in his or her brain." Don't *Think of an Elephant!* has a whole chapter (chapter ten) based on this phenomenon. *Thinking Points* also has a whole chapter on this phenomenon, called "Biconceptualism." Here is what Pinker says: "Nor is the claim that people are locked into a single frame anywhere to be found in cognitive linguistics, which emphasizes that people can nimbly switch among the many framing made available by language." Not everybody is all that nimble when it comes to conservative versus progressive worldviews, but many people can shift back and forth in a particular area of life — or an election — as I discuss.

In *Whose Freedom?*, I discuss the difference between freedom from and freedom to (page 30). Then, throughout the book, I show that both the progressive and conservative versions of freedom use both freedom from and freedom to. For example, progressives focus on freedom from want and fear, as well as from government spying on citizens and interfering with family medical decisions; they also favor freedom of

access to opportunity and fulfillment in life (e.g., education and health care). Conservatives are concerned with freedom from government interference in the market (e.g., regulation) and they are concerned with freedom to use their property any way they want. In short, the old Isaiah Berlin claims about the distinction do not hold up.

Pinker acts as if I don't discuss the distinction: "Lakoff again makes little use of previous analyses. Freedom comes in two flavors." And then he writes as if he is informing me of freedom from and freedom to, when I have discussed both throughout the book. Even worse, he gets it wrong. He cites the old-fashioned claims that just don't work. This becomes clear all through the book if you actually read it.

In another case, chapter seven of *Whose Freedom?* discusses direct versus systemic causation. On the first page of the chapter, I say, "It is surely not the case that conservatives are simpleminded and cannot think in terms of complex systems. Indeed, conservative strategists consistently outdo progressive strategists when it comes to long term overall strategic initiatives." Pinker's version: "It takes considerable ignorance, indeed chutzpah, to boast that only a progressive such as himself can understand the difference between systemic and direct causation." The opposite of what I say. I'll leave off here, though the same tactics are used throughout the review.

The results coming out of neuroscience and the cognitive sciences show that, far from there being "old-fashioned ... disembodied universal reason," people really reason using frames, prototypes, image-schemas, and metaphors — and bring emotion into the mix as an inherent part of rationality. All of these mechanisms of thought are embodied — resulting from the nature of brain structure and neural computation on the one hand, and embodied experience on the other. They lie outside of

the mechanisms of formal logic, which is the basis of the contemporary version of seventeenth-century rationalism.

What is one to do in the face of this reality? In *Whose Freedom?*, I argue (page 257) for a "higher rationality," a mode of thought that takes into account the understanding of the view of mind that comes from cognitive science and neuroscience — a rationality that talks about frame-based and metaphorical thought explicitly and discusses their effects, especially in politics. But this is only possible if the true nature of thought is widely understood, and that takes honest, open public discussion.

What is one to make of Pinker's essay? Why would he repeatedly attribute to me the opposite of what I say? I can think of two explanations. One is that he is threatened and is being nasty and underhanded — trying to survive by gaining competitive advantage any way he can. The other is that he is thinking in terms of old frames that do not permit him to understand new ideas and facts that do not fit his frames. Since he can only understand what I am saying in terms of his old frames, he can only make sense of what I am saying as being nonsense — the opposite of what I actually say. That is, since the facts I cite don't fit his frames, his frames stay and the facts are adjusted to fit them. I don't know Pinker well enough to know which is true, or whether there is some third explanation.

* * *

If you are a reader who wants to know what I have really said and what the overall evidence is, I direct you to the following books and to the long lists of references given there. I'm sorry the list is so long, but a lot of researchers have been working out the new view. Getting informed is well worth the trouble. The issues are large, deep, and vital to the preservation of our democracy.

Nonpolitical cognitive science books:

Metaphors We Live By (with Mark Johnson)

Women, Fire and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal About the Mind

More Than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor (with Mark Turner).

Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Philosophy

Where Mathematics Comes From: How the Embodied Mind Brings Mathematics into Being

Applications to politics:

Moral Politics

Don't Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate

Whose Freedom? The Battle Over America's Most Important Idea

Thinking Points: Our American Vision and Values; A Progressive's Handbook (with the Rockridge Institute)

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