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THE NATION AS FAMILY

It's no accident that our political beliefs are structured by our idealizations of the family. Our earliest experience with being governed is in our families. Our parents "govern" us: They protect us, tell us what we can and cannot do, make sure we have enough money and supplies, educate us, and have us do our part in running the house.

So it is not at all surprising that many nations are metaphorically seen in terms of families: Mother Russia, Mother India, the Fatherland. In America, we have founding fathers, Daughters of the American Revolution, Uncle Sam, and we send our collective sons and daughters to war. In George Orwell's dystopian novel 1984, the voice of the totalitarian state was called Big Brother.

As George Lakoff discussed at length in his 1996 book, *Moral Politics*, this metaphorical understanding of the nation-as-family directly informs our political worldview.¹ Directly, but not consciously. As with other aspects of framing, the use of this metaphor lies below the level of consciousness. But unlike other, more modest framings, the nation-as-family metaphor structures entire worldviews, organizing whole systems of frames in our brains. This was an empirical discovery about how people think about politics. Using cognitive modeling and the cognitive theory of metaphor (see *Moral Politics* for methodological details), Lakoff formulated the nation-as-family metaphor as a precise mapping between the nation and the family: the homeland as home, the citizens as siblings, the government (or the head of government) as parent. The government's duty is to citizens as a parent's is to children: provide security (protect us); make laws (tell us what we can and cannot do); run the economy (make sure we have enough money and supplies); provide public schools (educate us).

This metaphor explains many of the profound differences between pure progressives and pure conservatives on all sorts of issues—from abortion to gun control, from environmental regulation to lawsuit restrictions, from "gay marriage" to the estate tax. Why? Simply put, Americans have two very different idealized models of the family: a "strict father" family and a "nurturant parent" family. This produces two fundamentally opposed moral systems for running a nation—two ideologies that specify not only how the nation should be governed but also, in many respects, how we should live our lives.

But we are all biconceptuals; both models are seared into our brains. Each may be used actively (in politics or everyday life) or passively (say, in understanding movies). The models are cultural, and, by virtue of living in the same culture, we become familiar with both models.

Being conservative in some aspect of life, say, religion, means that you use a strict father model to govern your functioning in that arena. Similarly, being progressive in some aspect of life means that you use a nurturant parent model to understand and function in that arena. Pure conservatives and pure liberals use one model to govern all aspects of their political life.

The two models contradict each other; they cannot be applied in the same situation at the same time by the same person. In neural terms, they are mutually inhibitory: activating one inhibits the other.

This is the Moral Politics model. It is a theoretical construct within cognitive science that explains many aspects of American political life.

It also explains the nature of ideological purity—why pure conservatives are anti-abortion, anti-gun control, for “tort reform,” against environmental regulation, for lower taxes, against “gay marriage,” and so on, while pure progressives have the opposite views. The Moral Politics model explicates the political visions of pure progressives and conservatives and the modes of reasoning characteristic of both.

The model also illuminates a very important political phenomenon. Why do fundamentalist Christians tend to be right-wing conservatives rather than progressives? For instance, why is James Dobson of Focus on the Family, a child-rearing educator from the Christian Coalition, a powerful force in right-wing politics? Dobson is a major proponent of the strict father family in actual family life.² Why is he a right-wing conservative rather than a progressive? The Moral Politics model explains why.

Fundamentalist Christians view God as a strict father, and the model that structures their religion and their family life also structures their politics. As we will see in Chapter 6, conservatives and progressives differ on the meaning of our most fundamental political concepts: fairness, freedom, equality, responsibility, integrity, and security. The strict/nurturant distinction in family models predicts these differences in the meaning of our most central political concepts.

It is crucial to distinguish between mental models and the names we use for them. Naming is an inexact art. In general, simple names cannot accurately characterize the richness of the models. For example, the strict father model refers to the strictness of the father in applying punishment to a misbehaving child. But the model is far richer than that. The term “strict father” does not capture the focus on the “free” market, the focus on individual discipline, and many other aspects of conservative politics.

The same is true of the nurturant parent model. “Nurturance” characterizes the empathy and care aspects of the model, but the name is less clear about the responsibility aspect, the strength needed for responsibility, and the implications about protection, freedom, fairness, and so on.

Many other names for these models have been tried, but the inherent limitations on naming will always lead to a discrepancy between the name and model.

THE NURTURANT PARENT MODEL

In this model, if there are two parents, both are equally responsible for the moral development of the children. Their primary duty is to love their children and nurture

them to be happy in their lives. Nurturing has two aspects: empathy and responsibility, both for oneself and for others. Remember that to take care of others, you have to take care of yourself. Equally important, parents raise their children to nurture others, which requires children to have empathy for others, responsibility for oneself, and social responsibility. This is the very opposite of indulgence or spoiling.

Nurturant parents are authoritative without being authoritarian. They set fair and reasonable limits and rules, and take the trouble to discuss them with their children. Obedience derives from love for parents, not from fear of punishment. Open and respectful communication takes place between parents and children. Parents explain their decisions in order to legitimize their authority. Parents accept questioning by children as a positive trait but reserve the ultimate decision making for themselves.

Parents protect their children from external threats as a natural expression of their love and care.

THE PROGRESSIVE VISION

Apply the nurturant parent model to politics, and what you get is progressive moral and political philosophy. Though progressive thought can be extremely complex when one gets into the details, it is actually quite simple at the highest level of moral values and general principles.³

Progressive morality, like the nurturant parent model, is based on empathy and responsibility.

Empathy is the capacity to connect with other people, to feel what others feel, to imagine oneself as another and hence to feel a kinship with others.

Responsibility means acting on that empathy—responsibility for yourself and for others.

From empathy and responsibility, a set of core progressive values follows. These are the values that define progressive thought and structure progressive positions on any issue. They all involve acting on your empathy to achieve the following:

- Protection (for people threatened or under duress)
- Fulfillment in life (so others can lead meaningful lives as you would want to)
- Freedom (because to seek fulfillment, you must be free)
- Opportunity (because leading a fulfilling life requires opportunities to explore what is meaningful and fruitful)
- Fairness (because unfairness can stifle freedom and opportunity)
- Equality (because empathy extends to everyone)
- Prosperity (because a certain base amount of material wealth is necessary to lead a fulfilling life and pay for enough shelter, food, and health)
- Community (because nobody makes it alone, and communities are necessary for anyone to lead a fulfilling life)

Remember that you have to take care of yourself if you are to act responsibly toward others. In progressive morality, there is no contradiction between acting to take care of

yourself and acting to help others, since you can't take care of others if you are not taking care of yourself. The old dichotomy between self-interest and altruism is false, since extreme self-sacrifice can make it impossible to act for the sake of others.

Naturally flowing from these progressive values are four core political principles. These principles, largely unconscious, are found over and over again as the basis of arguments for progressive policies and programs.

The Common Good Principle

Franklin Roosevelt said in his second inaugural address, "In our personal ambitions we are individualists. But in our seeking for economic and political progress as a nation, we all go up, or else we all go down, as one people." In short, the common good is necessary for individual well-being. Citizens bring together their common wealth for the common good in order to build an infrastructure that benefits all and that contributes crucially to the pursuit of individual goals. (Warren Buffett has famously observed that he could not have achieved his wealth had he lived in Bangladesh, where the banking system and stock market leave much to be desired.⁴)

Here are a few things that taxpayer money—the common wealth—pays for: the interstate highway system, the satellite system, the security system (police, firefighters, the military), the banking system, the court system. Just about every business depends on bank loans (the banking system), contract enforcement (the court system), communications (the Internet and satellite systems), and the shipping of goods (the highway system).

The common wealth provides protection for the common good: police, military, firefighters, courts.

It allows for fulfillment in life and creates opportunities, thereby enhancing the common good: schools, universities, national parks, roads, a banking infrastructure to start a business. The more money one makes, the more one tends to use the common wealth, and the more responsibility one has to contribute to its maintenance. That is an important moral basis for progressive taxation.

The common wealth creates freedoms for the common good. Freedom is enshrined in our Constitution, is protected by the courts, and is enhanced by the common wealth. The social safety net and Social Security grant us freedom from want. The Bill of Rights grants us a host of other freedoms.

The common good principle promotes fairness and equality. A progressive government guards against discrimination and works to prevent underserved communities. It operates on the principle that we're all in this together, not that you're on your own. Being in this together means that we get the benefits of everyone working for the common good, as well as the responsibilities.

Using the common wealth for the common good creates prosperity and fosters community.

In business, the common good principle results in ethical business practices. An ethical business does no harm—to individuals, communities, or the environment. It also contributes real benefits to the public as well as its employees and its community. A progressive government acts to support ethical business and to discourage, or even prosecute, unethical business.

The common good principle also means the preservation of common property, or the commons: national monuments; public parks and beaches; the oceans, rivers, and streams; the electromagnetic spectrum (used for radio, TV, and other forms of communication); scientific knowledge; our genetic heritage; and the Internet. These serve us all, and they must be kept public for future generations.

The Expansion of Freedom Principle

Progressive moral values lead—and have historically led—Americans to demand the expansion of fundamental forms of freedom. They include voting rights, workers' rights, public education, public health, consumer protection, civil rights, and civil liberties. These expansions reveal what traditional American values have been about.⁵

The Human Dignity Principle

Empathy requires the recognition of basic human dignity, and responsibility requires us to act to uphold it.

This principle provides baselines for a wide range of progressive arguments: against torture, for intervention to prevent genocide, for programs to meet the basic needs of the poor, for women's rights, against racism, and so on.

As a country, we need to decide where the boundary of human dignity falls. Food, shelter, education, and health care are all basic rights for all people. Progressives, acting on their belief in human dignity, feel it is necessary to secure these rights for all our citizens.

The Diversity Principle

Empathy—which involves identifying with and connecting socially and emotionally with the other—leads to an ethic of diversity in our communities, schools, and workplaces. Diversity fosters meaningful communities and creates a range of opportunities for citizens to lead fulfilling lives.

“Diversity” has become a progressive code word for measures against the effects of discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, and sexual preference. Because these forms of discrimination have been so widespread and their effects so long-lasting, they have reduced the possibilities for societal enrichment through diversity.

Market diversity, say, in energy or agriculture, provides protection, so that a shortage in one area can easily be dealt with by surplus or production in another. If we have access to a diversity of energy sources, we will not be susceptible to the difficult consequences of rising oil and gas prices. Biological diversity both guarantees against monocultures being wiped out by some pestilence and serves to promote appreciation of the wonders of nature. Artistic and musical diversity allows for the creation of new forms of art and music.

We will now take a look at the competing “strict father” model and the very different set of guiding values and principles that flow from it.

THE STRICT FATHER MODEL

A family has two parents, a father and a mother. We live in a dangerous world, where there is constant competition with inevitable winners and losers. The family requires a strong father to protect it from the many evils in the world and to support it by winning those competitions.

Morally, there are absolute rights and wrongs. The strict father is the moral authority in the family; he knows right from wrong, is inherently moral, and heads the household. The father's authority and decisions are not to be challenged. Obedience to the father is moral; disobedience is immoral.

The mother supports and upholds the authority of the father but is not strong enough to protect the family or to impose moral order by herself. She provides affection to the children to show love, reward right conduct, and provide comfort in the face of punishment.

Children are born undisciplined. The father teaches them discipline and right from wrong. When children disobey, the father is obligated to punish, providing an incentive to avoid punishment and helping his children develop the internal discipline to do right. This "tough love" is seen as the only way to teach morality. Children who are disciplined enough to be moral can also use that discipline as adults to seek their self-interest in the market and become prosperous.

Again, that is the ideal model. In real families, it is commonplace to have, say, a strict father and a nurturant mother. Siblings may identify with different parents and grow up with different ideal models.

Pure conservative philosophy is the application of the strict father model—and only that model—to politics. Many self-identified "conservative" voices have actually been biconceptuals of various sorts, e.g., economically conservative but progressive about civil liberties, economically progressive but socially conservative, or vice versa. Such divisions among partial conservatives defined the old fault lines within the conservative movement: libertarians, fiscal conservatives, social conservatives, religious fundamentalists, and more recently, neoconservatives.

What is relatively new in American conservative politics is the attempt to weed the partial progressives out of leadership positions so that pure conservatives are left as the dominant leaders, applying the strict father model to all issue areas.

Also new is the appearance of the authoritarian conservative, who applies the strict father model not just to all issues but to governing itself! The George W. Bush administration has placed itself above Congress (choosing which parts of which laws it will accept) and above the courts (fighting to avoid jurisdiction). Bush himself has been governing as the ultimate moral authority—the decider—not only in the administration but in the Republican caucuses in Congress, in the Republican Party itself, and even in much of the conservative media. A great many old-guard conservatives were not authoritarians in their own community or in governing the nation. John W. Dean, for example, a Goldwater conservative who worked in the administration of former president Richard M. Nixon, considers the Bush administration so authoritarian as to border on fascism.⁶

THE CONSERVATIVE VISION

Conservative morality centers on issues of authority and control, both self-control (discipline) and control over others.

Authority should be legitimate and morally good. Authorities have power and, since they are inherently good, use it legitimately to exert control. A political authority has been elected or chosen and thus has legitimate moral authority, which must be respected.

Other values follow from these fundamental components of authority and control:

Discipline: Self-control is an essential quality. Moral authority requires internal discipline, which is learned through punishment when one does wrong. The failure of an authority to punish for wrongdoing is a moral failure.

There are political consequences of such a view. Getting something one hasn't earned weakens one's discipline and hence one's capacity to be moral. Thus, if you are not prosperous, you are not disciplined enough to be prosperous and therefore deserve your poverty. Social programs, which give people things they haven't earned, lessen people's incentive to be disciplined and, hence, to be moral. Social programs thus serve immorality and should be abandoned.

Ownership: Property acquired through a market or other legitimate means is yours to do with as you see fit. You can spend your money better than the government can. The only use of the common wealth for the common good is to provide physical security. The profit motive creates efficiency in business. Government, lacking a profit motive, is inefficient and wasteful—and gets in the way of the market via regulation, taxation, unionization, and lawsuits.

Hierarchy: Economic, social, and political hierarchy is natural because some people are more talented and disciplined than others and deserve to be higher on the totem pole. This is equity—higher position earned through merit (talent and discipline)—not equality. Equality of opportunity produces a hierarchy based on merit. And because the market is seen as natural and fair and as allowing the cream to rise to the top, success is an indicator of merit. This directly links democracy to a meritocracy.

Conservative philosophy does not recognize any of the progressive principles. For instance, the “common good principle” is seen as interfering with the free market, the system that rewards discipline. The freedoms that progressives want to expand—particularly freedom from want—are not seen as “freedoms” by conservatives. The “human dignity principle” is rejected by most conservatives because they believe humans do not have an inalienable dignity but must prove their self-worth through self-discipline. If they cannot provide for themselves, too bad. There are exceptions: God-fearing, churchgoing, hardworking people with conservative family values are the “worthy poor,” deserving of private charity. But “worth” is not conferred on just anybody by virtue of being human.

Finally, the “diversity principle” is not valued for its own sake—it is overridden by a merit-based market that confers success through competition.

In contrast to the progressive principles, conservatives have the following:

The Moral Authority Principle

Morality comes from obeying legitimate moral authorities: God (or His minister or priest), the law, the president if you work in government, your parents if you are a

child, your teacher if you are a student, your coach if you are an athlete, your commanding officer if you are in the military, and so on.

The Individual Responsibility Principle

All of us are individually responsible for our own destiny. If you succeed, it's because you deserve it; if you fail, it's your own fault. You're on your own, and you should be. No coddling.

The Free-Market Principle

The free market promotes efficiency, creates wealth, is natural and moral, and rewards individual discipline. Since wealth can provide many freedoms, the free market is a mechanism of freedom and there should be no interference from government. It interferes in the free market in four ways: regulation, workers' rights (worker safety, pensions, overtime pay, etc.), taxation (takes away the rewards of the market), and class-action lawsuits that cost money. People's needs—save physical security—should be met through the market.

The Bootstraps Principle

With enough self-discipline, everyone can pull himself or herself up by the bootstraps. The government has no responsibility to help people who have fallen behind, because it's their own fault, caused by lack of discipline and morality. Charity is an act of individual virtue, not a responsibility of government.

CAUSATION THEORIES: POVERTY AND TERRORISM

In surveying conservative and progressive arguments, we have noticed another important regularity. Conservatives seem to argue on the basis of direct, individual causation, while progressives tend to argue on the basis of systemic, complex causation. Two prime examples are terrorism and poverty.

Conservatives see terrorism in simple terms: evil people whose conduct is inexcusable and therefore unworthy of analysis. The most that conservatives will concede is that terrorists "hate our freedoms."⁷

Liberals tend to ask questions about the deeper, systemic causes of terrorism. Though liberals agree that the conduct is inexcusable, they consider what factors cause hatred of the United States: our military presence in Islamic countries, the absence of schools other than religious madrassas in those countries, our support of authoritarian monarchies in many Arab nations, and our active support of Israel.

This different understanding of the cause of terrorism translates into different solutions. Conservatives respond with little more than meeting force with force. Liberals consider whether long-term solutions require something other than military action, such as engaging the "battle of ideas" in the Middle East. In such a battle, all sorts of options are on the table, ranging from pushing allies like Saudi Arabia to

democratize their nations and working more aggressively to solve the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.

Regarding the causes of poverty, conservatives lay the blame squarely on the poor. The American dream is available to anyone who is disciplined, moral, and enterprising. The poor are by definition lazy and immoral—simply not willing to lift themselves by their bootstraps.

Liberals see a more complex set of factors: Educational disadvantages, cultural biases, the vestiges of racism, entrenched institutions, as well as some government policies are all seen as contributing to entrenched poverty. Liberals deride the growing gap between rich and poor, while conservatives see it as a natural consequence of a just free market.

The same direct vs. systemic causation dichotomy occurs in a host of areas, such as crime, health care, environment, international relations, immigration, and more.

These different outlooks are predictable and flow from the different family models. In the strict father model, children get direct commands and are punished directly if they don't obey. Their transgressions are individual and so is their punishment. This is consistent with fundamentalist religion, where individual sins—or lack of them—determine whether one is headed for heaven or hell. In the nurturant parent model, children develop morally via attachment and empathy, which require an attunement to complex situations and contextual factors.

This presents liberals with a challenge, because in our sound-bite culture, it can be difficult to persuade with complex arguments. The answer is not to cede to a simplistic but ineffective solution to complex problems. In Chapter 8, we offer some suggestions for dealing with these complicated issues with consistent, authentic, values-based communications.

IDENTITY ISSUES: GAYS AND ABORTION

Why should someone in a long-term, stable, and loving heterosexual marriage be threatened if a gay or lesbian couple in a similar relationship were to marry?

Imagine that you are a pure conservative and your worldview is shaped by the strict father model applied to every aspect of your life. It defines your very identity: your notion of right and wrong, of God, of what makes a good parent, and of how to run a successful business. It even defines your maleness or femaleness, your sexual identity.

The strict father model is gendered. It has a male husband and a female wife. The parents in that model cannot be lesbian or gay. Legitimizing gay marriage delegitimizes the strict father model. The “defense of marriage” is really a defense of the strict father model. Being against “gay marriage” is symbolic of defending an identity defined by the strict father model—defending who you are at the very core of your being.

The abortion issue works in a similar way. In the idealized strict father model, the father is the moral authority; he controls reproduction decisions. He decides whether to use birth control, whether to have children, and whether his wife can have an abortion. He is responsible for his daughter's sexuality, and he will decide whether she should have sex education, whether she should have sex, and whether she can use birth control. And if she gets pregnant out of wedlock, he decides whether she should have an abortion.

Even the notion of abortion as murder comes from the strict father model, where there is an absolute right and an absolute wrong. That means all categories that appear in moral law must have strict defining conditions, especially the category of a human being. In philosophy, those defining conditions are called “essences,” and they cannot change over time. So the essence of being human, which is there right at birth, must have also been there right before birth, and the day before that and the day before that, back to the moment of conception! Abortion must therefore be the purposeful killing of a human being for one’s own benefit—murder!

CONSERVATIVE POPULISM

Liberals have generally failed to understand the nature of conservative populism. They tend to be puzzled that poor and middle-class conservatives vote against their own economic interests. The stereotype is that conservative populists are not too bright, are uninformed, and are being bamboozled by rich conservatives. The cure, liberals think, is telling them the truth. Just get the right information and get them to understand the economic facts of the matter, and they will all become economic populists and vote with progressives. It’s a pipe dream.

Conservative populism is cultural in nature. That’s what the conservatives’ “culture war” is about. Conservative populists have a strict father morality and an identity based on it. Accordingly, they tend to reason about politics with direct causation, not systemic causation. But most important, they have been convinced by the conservative message machine that they are being oppressed—by the literal elite! They think they’re being sneered at by the limousine liberals, the Hollywood liberals, the sushi-eating, latte-sipping liberals. They believe they’re being lied to by the liberal media, that their money is being stolen by tax-and-spend liberals, that their private property is being endangered by liberal environmentalists, that their businesses are being squeezed by the liberal unions, that their religion is under attack by the godless liberals, and that their family is under threat from liberal feminists and gays. The word they use most to characterize their political aspirations is “liberty,” which means freedom from the oppression of a political and cultural elite.⁸

Rational appeals to their economic well-being won’t change them.

Here is the only hope we see: Reach out to those who are biconceptual and identify with their partial progressive values—values they genuinely share with progressives. On the basis of that identity, convince them of an important truth, that they are being oppressed by conservatives—the land they love is being destroyed by conservatives, their progressive Christianity is under severe attack by conservative fundamentalists, their very bodies and their families’ bodies are under attack by conservatives. There is no lack of arguments to make here.

Without an understanding of the role of strict father morality in American culture, there is no hope of activating progressive aspects of their being.