

Handout for Session II

for the discussion of George Lakoff's conception of moral politics at
Olympia Unitarian Universalist Congregation, **January 10, 2005**
(**Session 3** will be held on **January 24**. **Session 4** will held on **January 31**)

A. Experiential morality. (*Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think*, 41-2)

1. "The most fundamental form of morality concerns promoting the experiential well-being of others and the avoidance and prevention of experiential harm to others or the disruption of the well-being of others. Here is part of what is meant by 'well-being': Other things being equal, you are better off if you are *healthy* rather than sick, *rich* rather than poor, *strong* rather than weak; free rather than imprisoned, *cared for* rather than uncared for, *happy* rather than sad, *whole* rather than lacking...if you live in a community with *close social ties*, rather than in a hostile or isolated one...

2. The metamoral concept of "keeping the books." (*Moral Politics*, 44-63)

a. Conceptualizing well-being as wealth –We characterize an increase in well-being as a 'gain' and a decrease as a 'loss' or 'cost;' a course of action as being 'worth it' or as 'profitable.' "[I]t allows us to think of something qualitative (well-being) in terms of something quantitative (money)..."

b. Reciprocation –"Moral action is giving something of positive value; immoral action is giving something of negative value...There is a moral imperative to pay one's moral debts."

c. The well-being as wealth metaphor "serve[s] to remind us that these are commonplace products of the human mind, not principles built into the objective structure of the universe." (63)

B. Failure of Liberals and Conservatives to Comprehend Conservatism (*Moral Politics*, 143-152)

1. Liberals believe (wrongly):

- a. Conservatism is "the ethos of selfishness;"
- b. Conservatives want less government;
- c. Conservatism is a conspiracy of the ultrarich to protect their money and power.

2. Conservatives believe (wrongly):

- a. Conservatism is against big government;
- b. Conservatism is for traditional values;
- c. Conservatism is just what the Bible tells us.

C. Two models of family based on traditional male and female roles.

1. Strict father model (*Moral Politics*, 66-107) [Review *Don't Think of an Elephant* 12-13.]

a.. Presupposes folk theory of human nature: "People left to their own devices, tend simply to satisfy their desires. But, people will make themselves do things they don't want to do in order to get rewards; they will refrain from doing things they do want to do in order to avoid punishment." (*Moral Politics*, 67)

b. Conservative categories of moral action. (*Moral Politics*, 166-67)

When conservatives are functioning politically, these moral categories are primary.

- (1) Promoting strict father morality in general.
- (2) Promoting self-discipline, responsibility, and self-reliance.
- (3) Upholding the morality of reward and punishment.
 - (a) Preventing interference with the pursuit of self-interest by self-disciplined, self-reliant people.
 - (b) Promoting punishment as a means of upholding authority.

- (c) Ensuring punishment for lack of self-discipline.
- (4) Protecting moral people from external evils.
- (5) Upholding the moral order.

2. Nurturant parent morality (*Moral Politics*, 108-140) [Review *Don't Think of an Elephant* 12-13.]

a. "What does the world have to be like if people like this are to develop and thrive? The world must be as nurturant as possible and respond positively to nurturance. It must be a world that encourages people to develop their potential and provides help when necessary. And correspondingly, it must be a place where those who are helped feel a responsibility to help others and carry out that responsibility. It must be a world governed maximally by empathy, where the weak who need help get it from the strong. It must be a world governed as much as possible by bond of affection, respect, and interdependence. Finally, it must be a world in which the nurturance provided to us by the natural environment is recognized, appreciated, and returned. In short, the natural world must be sustained, and we must do everything we can to sustain it." (*Moral Politics*, 112)

b. Liberal categories of moral action: (*Moral Politics*, 166-67)

When liberals are functioning politically, these moral categories are primary.

- (1) Empathetic behavior and promoting fairness.
- (2) Helping those who cannot help themselves.
- (3) Protecting those who cannot protect themselves.
- (4) Promoting fulfillment in life.
- (5) Nurturing and strengthening oneself in order to do the above.

c. "Morality as Empathy and Nurturance requires that one empathize with and be nurturant toward people with different values than one's own, including different moral values. This means that one cannot maintain a strict good-evil dichotomy...[Moral strengths or virtues are:] social responsibility, generosity, respect for the values of others, open-mindedness, a capacity for pleasure, aesthetic sensitivity, inquisitiveness, ability to communicate, honesty, sensitivity to feelings, considerateness, cooperativeness, kindness, community-mindedness, and self-respect." (*Moral Politics*, 127)

3. No claim that each person has only one idealized model (*Moral Politics*, 159)

There are variations within the liberal and conservative models (*Moral Politics*, 285-298)

- a. Idealistic vs. Pragmatic Conservatives and Liberals
- b. Moral focus can shift the emphasis, e.g. liberal with focus on civil liberties can conflict with liberal with focus on violence against women regarding pornography.
- c. Liberal Strict-Father Intellectuals

D. Compare Lakoff's liberal moral ideals with Unitarian Universalist principles:

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association,
 covenant to affirm and promote: The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
 Justice, equity and compassion in human relationships;
 Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
 A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
 The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations
 and in society at large;
 The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
 Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.