

# THE POLITICAL MIND

*A Cognitive Scientist's Guide  
to Your Brain and  
Its Politics*

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PENGUIN BOOKS

## The Brain's Role in Family Values

**W**hy do certain people, most of them self-identified as conservatives, find certain acts of love—premarital, extramarital, or homosexual—more sinful than war or torture?

Why should a conservative living in the Midwest find it personally threatening when gays get married in San Francisco or Massachusetts?

Why doesn't a conservative government take better care of its veterans, and why don't veterans and their families rebel en masse?

Why do many progressives object to the death penalty on moral grounds, while not being opposed to abortion on the same grounds?

Why do progressives feel a sense of responsibility for righting the wrongs of past generations?

And why should we find progressive and conservative values and modes of thought outside of politics proper—in kindergartens, Little League coaching, churches, summer camps, and so on?

Why should political values and modes of thought pervade our society?

The analysis of chapter 2—the politics of empathy and authority—did not go far enough to explain all these apparent contradictions, or hypocrisies, some would say. To answer these questions and many others, we need to move to the study of family values, some of which I discussed in my book *Moral Politics*. Since writing that book I've encountered new research on the workings of

the brain that sheds new light on the specific form of morality today called "family values."

I was drawn into the study of politics back in 1994 by a basic puzzle. As a progressive, I could not understand how the main conservative positions fit together: What does being for cutting taxes have to do with being against gun control? What does being against abortion have to do with being against environmental regulation? What does advocating for tort reform have to do with shunning gay marriage? What makes these positions fit together sensibly? I have opposing positions on all these issues. How do my views fit together?

The eighteenth-century view of the mind doesn't help here. But all these questions have straightforward answers when one looks at how the mind really works. What I discovered was that family values are absolutely central to American politics. But not in a direct literal fashion.

In chapter 2, I argued that American politics is based on an opposition of empathy and authority. That was a literal description, an oversimplified one that was stripped of deeper content. The content is metaphorical at a deeper level.

We all think with a largely unconscious metaphor: the Nation as Family. Every third-grader knows that George Washington was the Father of his Country. Nobody questions it. We all speak of the founding fathers. We send our sons and daughters to war, even if they are not our sons and daughters. We speak of Daughters of the American Revolution. We have Homeland Security. And conservatives complain that progressives want a "nanny state." And in other countries, there is Mother Russia, Mother India, and the Fatherland.

From my research on conceptual metaphor, I knew that we drew inferences about the metaphorical target using the metaphorical source. I reasoned that as there were two versions of what the nation should be like, there might be two ideal versions of the family mapped by the Nation as Family metaphor onto the nation. I worked backward: given the structure of the

metaphor and the political differences, I hypothesized two idealized versions of the family that would correspond to two idealized versions of the nation. What emerged were two versions of the family—a strict father family that mapped onto pure conservative politics, and a nurturant parent family that mapped onto pure progressive politics.

Before going into them, it is worth clearing up some misunderstandings. These family models are idealized; they are mental models of idealized family life, mapped onto mental models of idealized national life. They may or may not have to do with how you were actually raised. Indeed, you may have rebelled against your upbringing, whichever it was.

As a cognitive scientist seeking to answer such questions, I was led to hypothesize these models. Such modeling using the best available hypothesis is standard in science. The models have turned out to explain a huge amount, and their explanatory power speaks volumes.

It should be noted that these models are descriptive not prescriptive. They do occur in people's brains. They are not something I am suggesting that people follow; people just do follow them. Newton, as a scientist, described how objects move; he had no power to make them move that way. The same is true here. American politics does use these models. All I can do is describe them. I have no power to make anyone think about politics using them. And no one else has the power to stop Americans from using them. They are an inextricable part of our politics. You may wish that other models were being used, and you may propose one or more of them. But you cannot impose some other model on people's brains.

### The Strict Father Model

The strict father is the moral leader of the family, and is to be obeyed. The family needs a strict father because there is evil in the world from which he has to protect them—and Mommy can't

do it. The family needs a strict father because there is competition in the world, and he has to win those competitions to support the family—and Mommy can't do it. You need a strict father because kids are born bad, in the sense that they just do what they want to do, and don't know right from wrong. They need to be punished strictly and painfully when they do wrong, so they will have an incentive to do right in order to avoid punishment. That is how they build internal discipline, which is needed to do right and not wrong. With that discipline, they can enter the market and become self-reliant and prosperous. As mature, self-disciplined, self-reliant adults, they can go off on their own, start their own families, and become strict fathers in their own households, without any meddling by their own fathers or anyone else.

Mapped onto politics, the strict father model explains why conservatism is concerned with authority, with obedience, with discipline, and with punishment. It makes sense in a patriarchal family where male strength dominates unquestionably. Authority, obedience, discipline, and punishment are all there in the family, organized in a package.

Why would someone in the Midwest genuinely feel threatened if gays in San Francisco are allowed to marry? The explanation is simple: there can be no gays in a strict father family; the gender difference and the role of masculinity are crucial. Suppose that kind of family—its values and its politics—defines who you are in everyday life. Suppose those values define your personality, not only how you function in your family but with your friends, in your business, in your church. Suppose that strict father marriage, with its version of masculinity, is a major narrative you live by. Then a threat to its legitimacy is a threat to your very being. Marriage isn't the real issue; the real issue is identity.

Why is it that conservatives, not progressives, tend to be against abortion? Think of some of the people who need an abortion: a woman who sees a conflict between motherhood and a career, or a teenager who has had sex outside marriage. In both cases, a decision by the woman on her own is an affront to the strict

father. He is to determine whether his wife gives birth—and conservatives in many states have supported husband notification laws. The pregnant teenager has disobeyed her father and should be punished—and many states have parental notification laws.

There is a second reason as well. For the father to know right from wrong, there must be an absolute right and wrong, and that means that categories must be absolute. If category lines are fuzzy, it could be hard to tell if a rule or a law was broken. Absolute categorization requires essences, properties that define absolute categories. Though it took Aristotle to spell out how the theory of essences worked, he was simply noticing the everyday version in the cognitive unconscious. There is an unconscious but pervasive folk theory of essences, in which essences define strict categories. Essences in this folk theory are inherent, don't change over time, and are the causal sources of natural behavior.

The logic of essences is all over conservative thought. Take the concept of character. Why do conservatives dote on it? If you can train people to have the right (read "conservative") moral character, they will do the right things even when not told. As for babies, if they have the essence of a human being at birth, and if that essence cannot change, then they had the essence of a human being before birth... all the way back to conception. The folk theory of essence is not conscious. It just defines intuitive "common sense."

In a strict father family, it is assumed that the father merits his authority, and indeed, throughout conservatism, hierarchies of power and wealth are justified on "merit." Why should CEOs make so much more money than other employees? They deserve it.

Competition is crucial. It builds discipline. Without competition, without the desire to win, no one would have the incentive to be disciplined, and morality would suffer, as well as prosperity. Not everyone can win in a competition, only the most disciplined people, who are also the most morally worthy. Winning is thus a sign of being deserving, of being a good person. It is important to

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be number one! Strict father families often promote competitive sports and take them very seriously.

Why do conservatives want schools to teach to the test and make judgments on the basis of test scores? To determine merit—who deserves to move up into the stratosphere of merit versus who gets to serve people of merit. That should be determined by discipline, punishment, and obedience—learning answers by rote, with punishment for failing to do so as an incentive to be more disciplined.

Why are fundamentalist Christians conservative? Because they view God as a strict father: Obey my commandments and you go to heaven; if not, you go to hell. Well, I'll give you a second chance. You can be "born again." Now obey my commands (as interpreted by your minister) and you go to heaven; otherwise, you go to hell: authority, obedience, discipline, punishment. Note that "individual responsibility" is a hallmark of this view of religion—it is up to you and you alone as to whether you get into heaven.

This explains why James Dobson, the leading exponent of strict father childrearing, is a political conservative, a fundamentalist Christian, while at the same time being a laissez-faire free marketer and an advocate for the use of force in foreign policy.

If your very identity is defined with respect to a strict father family, where male-over-female authority rules, then the legitimacy of gay marriage can threaten your identity. So can anything that violates the strict father family, such as extramarital sex.

On the other hand, war and torture at a national level are carrying out the protective function of the strict father. Why torture? If your enemies are evil, you can—and may have to—use the devil's own means against them.

From a conservative perspective, individual responsibility means being willing to deal with the consequences of your own decisions. If you join a volunteer army, you get paid to fight, you know you may be killed or maimed, those are the chances you take, and you should be prepared to deal with the consequences.

That's why conservatives don't pay that much attention to injured veterans. Moreover, the veterans themselves often have a strict father, hypermasculine identity and follow the code of strict self-reliance. There are some who will not accept outside help, even if it means being homeless.

### The Nurturant Parent Model

Progressives, correspondingly, have a nurturant parent model: two parents, with equal responsibilities, and no gender constraints—or one parent of either gender. Their job is to nurture their children and raise them to be nurturers of others. Nurture is empathy, responsibility for oneself and others, and the strength to carry out those responsibilities. This is opposite of indulgence: children are raised to care about others, to take care of themselves and others, and to lead a fulfilling life. Discipline is positive; it comes out of the child's developing sense of care and responsibility. Nurture requires setting limits, and explaining them. It requires mutual respect—a parent's respect for children, and respect for parents by children must be earned by how the parents behave. Restitution is preferred over punishment—if you do something wrong, do something right to make up for it. The job of parents is protection and empowerment of their children, and a dedication to community life, where people care about and take care of each other.

Here we see the politics of empathy emerging in the family. When mapped onto the nation, the result is the progressive politics of protection, empowerment, and community.

There is a reason why this model is gender neutral. Fathers can, and do, form deep positive attachments with their kids. They, as well as mothers, can do all the things required by the nurturance model. Conservatives, however, often parody this model by describing it as a mommy or nanny model, calling the Democrats the "mommy party" and speaking of the "nanny state." The same is often true of those who grew up with strict

fathers and nurturant mothers. But it is a mistake. Nurturance is not gendered and requires strength.

This does not mean that conservatives are all literal strict fathers or were raised by strict fathers. It does mean that deep conservative values and modes of thought are strict father values and modes of thought. And so it goes for nurturant parents and progressives. Biconceptuals, who have both modes of thought in different arenas of life, may differ on what happens in their actual families. But it is common for the model used in one's family to be the model used to define one's identity.

The point is simple. Metaphorical thought is natural. We have a Nation as Family metaphor. We have two very different idealized models of the family, which are mapped by the metaphor onto two very different views of the nation. Our modes of moral and political thought are taken from these models.

Until about ten years ago, these were the substantiated models. A lot has been learned about the brain since then. What has been learned basically verifies these views, but extends them to explain a lot more.

Why should there be a Nation as Family metaphor, in our culture and in many others? Why, in America, do the strict and nurturant models apply not only to nations but to sports teams, businesses, classrooms, advocacy groups, dance troupes, bands, and groups throughout civil society? Why are moral systems organized along these lines? How does a metaphor organize a system of values and a mode of thought?

### The Brain's Role in Metaphorical Thought

Metaphors are mental structures that are independent of language but that can be expressed through language. Metaphorical thought is ordinary, and mostly unconscious and automatic. Indeed, it is so unconscious and automatic that the basic way it works was discovered only three decades ago. We will start with some simple examples.