

## Local Opinion | Robert Abele: "How to Engage in Moral Discussion with the Political Right" Part I

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*Editor's note: This is Part One of a five-part series written by Dr. Robert Abele*

Dr. George Lakoff has become a bit of cause celebre this year due to the publication of his book **Don't Think of an Elephant!** Many liberal thinkers have hailed the book as "mandatory reading" for dealing with the conservative right. While the book itself, published at the end of last year, certainly makes some substantive points, Lakoff misses some crucial issues of which liberals ought to take account and discuss while organizing in order to take on the behemoth organization of the political-religious right. The purpose of this essay is to complement the strengths of Lakoff's analysis by shoring up the argument he proposes that liberal thinkers and social activists need to make in order to return America to its democratic sanity. In Part One of this series, we will discuss the nature and definition of a "value." In Part Two, we will compare these ideas concerning moral values to what the political-religious right says about values. Then in Part Three, we will develop an extended example of how progressives might critique the alleged value-system of the political-religious right. In Part Four, we will present an argument for the superiority of traditional liberal values as being best for American society, and draw some conclusions. This is only meant to be a start in the direction of analysis and discussion of values; a thumbnail sketch, not a finished analysis.

I. Values, facts, and systems/frameworks. Let us begin with a truth stated by Lakoff: moral values frame the debate for the political right as well as for the political left. So let's examine the notion of a "value," a project Lakoff does not undertake in his text. More importantly, it is not a project the political-religious right has undertaken. This is an enigma, given their constant barking in the language of values. (I will use the term "political-religious right" as all-inclusive here of evangelical Christians, deeply conservative social activists, and corporate-based Republican legislators, though I realize that these blocks in the conservative spectrum are not necessarily indistinguishable nor in agreement on all issues. However, that said, I would submit that the religious zealots of the political right have succeeded in taking over the Republican party at large, even if only temporarily.)

1) A general definition--Generally speaking, values are things that are deemed more important than other things. The very word "value" derives from the Latin word "valere," which means "to be of worth." Thus, values are based on our interests, desires, presuppositions, attitudes, etc. Note that "valere" is a verb. That means that values are not something set in concrete, nor something we just talk about. A true value is one that is lived and practiced. You know a person's true values not by what they say, but by what they do.

2) Kinds of values--There are various kinds of values: moral, pragmatic, intellectual, social, economic, religious, aesthetic, just to name some areas. The first important task in discussing values is to single out just what values we are talking about. In this essay we will be discussing moral values; that is, those things said to be important in order to be a good, self-actualized, human being.

3) A Definition of "moral values"--The most important question that needs to be answered when discussing moral values concerns whether they are objective or subjective? In other

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words, we want to know whether values exist because they are good in themselves, or whether values exist only because they are useful for us. For example, is there a difference between the value of making money and the value of being contented in my life? It would seem so. The first value, making money, is always a means to something else, whereas the second value of being content is not a value that is used for some other purpose. Rather, the question of why one wants to be happy cannot be answered by saying that happiness is good for something else. It is good in itself. These types of value are called "primary values" and they are distinguished from "secondary values," which are those values derived from and in aid to the achievement or fulfillment of primary values. Primary values include such aspects of human life that are necessary to live qua human, such as life, love, freedom, happiness, knowledge, health, integrity, rationality, to name a few. Secondary values would be those which aid and help fulfill those primary values. The necessary first step in values analysis is to decide which values are both necessary and desirable per se, and which ones are secondary and thus instrumental to the higher values.

4) Going between the horns of relativism and dogmatism--if I maintain that all values are only good because they are desired by the person or culture that values them, then I am advocating ethical relativism. Relativism makes all values equally good on the grounds that they are subjective; that is, chosen by individuals. Relativism takes the position "Who's to judge?" when it comes not only to one's choice of values, but more importantly to challenging another person's values. Another way of putting this is that relativism takes the value of "tolerance of others" to an absolute level; i.e. as an objective/primary value! Hence, the first problem with saying that all values are equal is that it contradicts itself.

The second problem with relativism is that it is counterintuitive. For example, choosing to volunteer for a charity would be equal in moral value to choosing to torture babies on the grounds that "no one can say for sure" which values are "most correct," values being a function of human desire alone. It is this that has the religious right seething at the political left. I believe the left makes a serious ethical error when it either says or implies that all values are relative. Most of us would say that the act of torturing babies is based on a gross misunderstanding of moral values, as it brings evil to others. Thus I can say that I might desire to do something, but it would not be good. Making this distinction requires that to some extent I believe in the objectivity of values. Thus some values are critical to humans and must be seen as objective: life, physical security, some freedom to do as we would like with our lives, etc. Consequently, not all values are equal and therefore values are not exclusively subjective.

Progressives make a serious mistake when they either advocate, or allow themselves to be characterized by the political-religious right as advocating, that the value of "tolerance" means that all values are of equal standing. One can advocate tolerance without being a relativist in morality. It is relativism that the progressives are being charged with, and it is not true that for one to be a liberal, one must be a relativist. We will see why this is the case as we proceed.

What the political-religious right has been very successful at doing is characterizing the debate with their own vocabulary; i.e. to attack "relativism" but to imply that it's definition is placing too high a value freedom and individuality. They are wrong to define either liberalism or relativism in this way, as we will see.

But the political-religious right makes a second serious mistake when it maintains that all (their) values are objective and that human desire has no role in their creation. To take a non-moral example, what would "wetness" mean to us if we saw a sign that said "wet paint"? Would the idea of wetness not come from our interaction with things said to be wet? Subjectivity plays some kind of role in the formation of the idea of wetness. In like manner, human beings play some kind of role in values creation. If we were not beings with desires, we would have no appreciation of values, and the question of why we desire values would be moot. The values of the right are not as indubitable as they think.

A third important mistake the political-religious right makes regarding values is the categorical assertion that all values come from God (for abundant examples of this belief, just "Google" the names of the political right's leaders: George Bush, Bill Frist, James Dobson, Tony Perkins, numerous Republican Congressional representatives, etc.). When they make this claim, they make the most critical mistake of all, known as moral dogmatism. This is the

unquestioned reliance on the certitude of one's own value system. This kind of dogmatism is a consequence of cutting short critical thinking. It is a moral failure and psychological limiting to those who hold them, as we will see below.

5) The universality of values—If values apply to one human, they apply to all. Thus, when making a list of our primary values, it becomes important to recognize that values are assumed to be goods for ALL humans, not just some. Thus, we can add to our list of primary values the values of equality, justice, and fairness. These three values have the application of values to and for all people in their very definitions.

There is a serious mistake in values discussion that some people can and do make at this point. When one takes the position that only some are entitled to realizing these realizing these values for themselves, it is called moral bigotry. There is a particularly poignant and frightening example of the moral bigotry of the political-religious right in the state of Virginia, where a case of religious bigotry at its "finest" has been supported by the state courts. In Chesterfield County, Cynthia Simpson, a county resident, had been placed on a list of citizens who took turns giving an invocation at the county board of supervisors meetings. When the board discovered that Simpson was a Wiccan, they denied her her turn at presenting the invocation because only invocations "consistent with the Judeo-Christian tradition" were acceptable at government meetings. On April 14 of this year, the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals agreed with the board of supervisors (see Church and State magazine, May, 2005).

6) The function of values--Moral values perform at least four important functions. First, they can serve to help us single out those facts that are subject to moral analysis. Those acts or events which serve my maximal needs physically, psychologically, and morally are much more important than other values, because these are the areas of human endeavor that allow for self-actualization or human happiness. We all screen the facts through our values. If I am being robbed at gunpoint, that is a far more important fact than the fact that I have violated an aesthetic values by wearing mismatched socks! Values, and particularly moral values, set the basis for which facts are seen as critical.

Second, values give order to our actions. Not only can we cite the example that all persons seek happiness for its own sake, but we can also see this at a less abstract level. If I have a choice between helping a friend in need and watching a movie, my actions will be determined by what I value more, and whether helping my friend contributes to her genuine good/happiness.

Third, values give moral import to facts by allowing us to arrange facts in a working hierarchy of importance. For example, if I need air to breathe and thus stay alive, that is a fact. But I overlay a value on that fact when I say "I have a right to air," or "You should allow me to breathe without suffocating me." By adding the notion of "should" or "ought," I directly imply that the fact that I need air to stay alive is a value for me and thus should be for you.

Fourth, values are used, often unconsciously, to generate a certain worldview and concrete institutional systems which are designed to support and maintain those values as legitimate for a person and/or a social group. For example, the "family" is one of many possible social structures or frames of reference used for the promotion and enhancement of certain values. When one says they value "family," they normally don't mean just the family. "Family" as a "value" is shorthand for a whole framework of values which their understanding of family represents. But because there are innumerable values structured in innumerable hierarchies and thus in innumerable frameworks, there is more than one possible family structure. The political-religious right overlooks this fact. When one adds to that there is no juried evidence that one structure is psychologically superior to another (i.e. aids the self-actualization of the members of that family), one must conclude that no one structure is intrinsically superior to another from a moral perspective.

Progressives must also remember that these same "family values" arguments used to attack gay marriage were used against divorce and single parent families just 25 years ago. This is a point at which Lakoff's analysis falls short by being overly narrow. By tying himself to only family metaphors, he misses a whole host of values of the political right, only some of which go into and can be seen in those familial models. Thus, he draws values from two different

models of the family, rather than seeing the values as productive of the framework. His is a legitimate method of "top-down" analysis, but when it comes to analyzing the values of the political right, I believe we are better served by a "bottom-up" analysis that examines the stated values of those who use them to generate a family model. But the family model is only one aspect of the overall political and religious movement we are dealing with today. This (bottom-up) approach will give us a broader understanding of the type of moral framework the political right operates from as well as the family metaphor they choose to generate. This is not a matter of guesswork either, for the political right (unlike the left) quite clearly states what their general values are. They are also clear that "family" is just a means to an end for those values, as we will see.

7) Values give rise to, and are frequently expressed in, principles-- Principles are "should" statements concerning how to act on values. Thus, because I value life, I formulate a principle which says "promote life" or "do not kill." Thus, values always state how human actions, characters, and institutions should be, not how they are. We express our moral values in terms of principles, which are "should" or "ought" statements concerning our values (Lakoff consistently confuses values with principles. Values tend to be single word statements about what is important, while principles advocate proper human intention and actions). So there is a close relationship between facts and values, but they are never the same thing.

8) Avoiding moral absolutism--In regard to principles, there is a moral misfiring that occurs when facts and values are split so far apart that they have nothing to do with one another, or worse, when facts are dispensed with in favor of total adherence to selected values "though the sky may fall." The latter belief is called moral absolutism. It is moral absolutism that allows people to ignore the facts that do not match with their absolutist worldview. For example, if my value is integrity, expressed in the principle "always keep your promises," and I find that keeping my promise will cause great harm to another (e.g. giving him his gun back simply because I promised him he could have it back, knowing he wants to use it to kill someone), that would be a negligence of the facts and one would be entirely culpable morally for ignoring this significant fact. Moral absolutism has precisely that serious problem: it maintains values and principles no matter what the facts are. At that point, it fails as a moral code because of the great potential for harm to humans it can do. This is where the political-religious right goes far astray from their alleged moral course. A moment's reflection shows what the political-religious right steadfastly denies: values are intimately connected to facts. For example, the fact that we live together in a society leads us to formulate the value of freedom; the fact that we are rational is connected intimately with our finding the value of respect for others, etc. Where the political-religious right fails grievously is when they place values so high above facts that the facts mean nothing in relation to the values. When encountering it, progressives need to ask, for example, what the connection is between freedom and society, or reason and respect, etc. This will put the onus on the right to defend their position without constant and unchallenged appeal to "God's values." Make them defend their values so that you can understand them.

We have now laid the foundation for a serious discussion of the values the political-religious right claim to hold. We will begin our discussion of this subject in the next part of this series.