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Science as salvation: George Lakoff and Steven Pinker as secular political theologians

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“We need a new, updated Enlightenment.”¹ So writes George Lakoff, a leading and influential cognitive scientist and linguist at the University of California, Berkeley. What we need, he says, is “a new understanding of what it means to be a human being; of what morality is and where it comes from; of economics, religion, politics, and nature itself; and even of what science, philosophy, and mathematics really are.” From this new understanding will follow, he continues, an expansion of our understanding of “freedom, equality, fairness, progress, even happiness.”² It is developments in science that mandate this new understanding, but it is the political situation that makes it necessary. And the stakes are high. His language is almost apocalyptic. “We have reached a point where democracy is in mortal danger—as is the very livability of our planet.”³ If America doesn’t change now, the future of the world is in danger. However, he also comes with good news: salvation is at hand. “The Old Enlightenment has run its course. A new Enlightenment is upon us, ready or not.”⁴ Recent scientific developments, especially in neuroscience and cognitive science, are revolutionizing our understanding of what it is to be human and how our rationality functions, which in turn will help us make adequate moral, political, and economic decisions. At the forefront of this development is his own cognitive science. What we need to do is to place moral, political, economic, and religious reality and discussions on a scientific basis, and thus free them from their traditional dependence on folk psychology, ideologies, religions, gut feelings, and bad science.

There are still obstacles. Lakoff, on the one hand, points to powerful anti-Enlightenment forces, in part based on fundamentalist religion, leading a sort of anti-democratic counter-revolution. On the other hand, the original Enlightenment itself partly developed, he claims, a faulty understanding of reason that still seriously affects both science and progressive political and religious thought and practice. Lakoff therefore has to battle simultaneously on several fronts, against religious transgressions into the worlds of science and politics, against conservative politics, and against bad science and bad

philosophy. In this article, I will examine his debate with Steven Pinker who combines what Lakoff considers to be disastrous political views with misguided Old Enlightenment philosophy and defective science.

Pinker is at least as influential a public scientist as Lakoff is. He is an evolutionary psychologist, a specialist in language and cognition, who teaches at Harvard. He is the author of several bestsellers such as *The Language Instinct*, *How the Mind Works*, *The Blank Slate*, and *The Stuff of Thought*. In 2004, *Time Magazine* ranked him among the 100 most influential people in the world.⁵ Like Lakoff, he makes sweeping claims about the moral and political consequences of our scientific knowledge about human nature. In a similar way, he is also involved in a struggle against faulty scientific and philosophical views that have been dominant since the Enlightenment, and against religious transgressions into both the scientific and the moral-political spheres. Although his rhetoric is not as grandiose as Lakoff's,⁶ he is not far behind in ambition. Philosopher Simon Blackburn wrote the following about his book *The Blank Slate*: "Still, it is not for its cultural history that people are buying this book in alarming *numbers*, but for the promise of a new synthesis, a science of the mind that finally tells us who we are, what is possible for us, how our politics should be organized, how people should be brought up, what to expect of ethics, or in short, how to live. In the old days, philosophers, dramatists, historians, anthropologists, writers and poets monopolized these subjects. Now behavioral economists, biologists, cognitive scientists, evolutionary theorists and neurophysiologists occupy the territory. A brave new dawn is upon us."⁷ Pinker is, he says, "the noisy prophet of a new world, in which a confluence of sciences finally delivers us the truth about ourselves."⁸

Both Lakoff and Pinker claim, although in different ways, that they are placing moral and political discussions on a more scientific basis. Yet, for Pinker, Lakoff is a prime example of both bad science and a misuse of science. In 2006, Pinker published, originally in *The New Republic*, a scathing critique of Lakoff's book *Whose Freedom?*, concluding that "There is much to admire in Lakoff's work in linguistics, but ... his thinking about politics ... is a train wreck." He also sharply criticized Lakoff's cognitive science and his claims about the neuroscientific basis for it. Pinker's article then led to a debate between him and Lakoff, first in the web-edition of *The New Republic* and then in later books. Lakoff replied that Pinker represents an out-of-date form of cognitive science that we know is impossible from a neuroscientific perspective. Basically, Pinker is "the most articulate spokesman" for a "17th century understanding of the mind".⁹

Science as salvation

The idea of science as a replacement for religion, traditional worldviews, and moralities has been around for a long time. At the heart of the set of stories modernity tells about itself, we find the notion of science as savior. The

economist Robert Nelson describes “the idea of elevating science to the status of religion” as “the ‘modern project’ of the past three hundred years in the Western world”.¹⁰ Humanity has grown up, matured and taken control of its own destiny. Science and science-based technology, economics, and politics are the primary tools for creating a mature kind of humanity and for building the future, a world of prosperity, democracy, justice and freedom. In this salvation history, “the Enlightenment” is the watershed, the salvific “event” that replaced religion and tradition with science. The Christian salvation history was privatized. Church and state began to separate. Christian theology has now at most a place in the margins of modern university. Control over research and education became crucial for the state. Many countries have university systems led and monopolized by the state. Today both science and universities are legitimated by their role in this salvation story. The state theologians are economists and social and natural scientists. They produce the knowledge necessary for our salvation. What they do is thus of national importance.¹¹

This type of exaltation of science has often been sharply criticized, but Lakoff and, in a more muted form, Pinker show that it is well and alive, and they are not alone. In recent years, many neuroscientists, cognitive scientists, and evolutionary psychologists have taken up the mantle.¹² Pinker writes one bestseller after another, and Lakoff’s extravagant language and his radical claims seem to work both inside and outside the scientific community. Lakoff’s success is evidenced by the reception his work has received from the wider public, not least from segments of the political elite culture. One of his smaller books has sold more than 250 000 copies! In the last few years, Lakoff for a time “emerged as one of the country’s most coveted speakers among liberal groups” and he has been advising the top leadership of the Democratic Party. However, lately he seems to have lost some of his status, especially after he was sharply criticized at length in a strategy book by Rahm Emanuel, the former chief of staff for President Barack Obama and now the mayor of Chicago.¹³

The idea of Science used here is something more than the many different activities that are included in the concept of science; it is rather the mythological idea that fundamentally separates science-based knowledge from other forms of knowledge. The word can be used in somewhat different ways. In Swedish, everything from physics and medicine to history and literary studies is described as science (*vetenskap*), and is as such clearly separated from non-science. No one can tell what it is that unifies such different activities, but the ideological role of this claim is crucial and powerful. The political philosopher John Gray has said that Science understood in this way (as opposed to the actual, manifold and very different types of research going on in the various disciplines) “serves two needs: for hope and censorship.” Today, he says, it alone supports the hope of progress (Gray says “the myth of progress”) and it “alone has the power to silence heretics.”¹⁴ The economist Deirdre McCloskey similarly writes: “Modernism seized the word ‘science’ for its purposes. The word has for a long

time been a club with which to beat on arguments the modernists did not wish to hear.”¹⁵ This rhetoric is part of the debate within or between disciplines, but it is also a powerful tool to legitimize and exclude different discourses and arguments from the wider public discussion on morality and politics.

Making morality and politics scientific

One of the claims of the Enlightenment was its promise to overcome the perpetual religious, moral and political conflicts and wars that were grounded, so it was said, in the arbitrary claims of religion and tradition.¹⁶ Politics and ethics should be built on grounds that are available, in principle, to any reasonable person, independent of history and culture. They should be genuinely rational. Scientific knowledge and a scientific worldview should replace religious ones based on authority and arbitrary dogmas. However, after more than three centuries, the disunity among people and traditions that in some way or another make claims of representing the heritage of the Enlightenment and/or science is no less than among 17th or 18th century Christians.

Lakoff and Pinker base their authority on their scientific competence. Both report a mass of research in disciplines close to their own specialties such as neuroscience, cognitive science, psychology, and linguistics. They then use these results, combined with a much more selective use of other disciplines, to create a mixture of social and political science, policy analysis, moral and political theory, and (in the case of Lakoff) political advocacy and direct advice for political campaigning. Specific results are selected, inserted into wider imaginative structures and interpretative frames, and then related to practical interests and purposes. At each stage, many different interpretative moves are possible, which makes the outcomes highly variable. The basis for their authority is their status as leading scientists in their own fields. However, what they offer is something more. They inform us, directly or indirectly, of what human nature is like, how human society functions, how we should live and how we can organize society (what is and is not possible) and this in turn is embedded in ontological conceptions, civilization narratives, and convictions about the content of the good life. As scientists, they produce a form of public philosophy or secular political theology, but they fail to recognize much of what actually determines their thinking. It is easy to see that much of the force of their arguments, rather than coming from their research, comes instead from taken for granted, even naturalized, cultural, moral, and ontological assumptions. The result is that the actual justification for their moral and political positions to a large extent is left out of the debate. This makes the discussion distorted and often extremely polemic. The fierce tone between Lakoff and Pinker is just one example. But because they cannot see or admit this, their discussions proceed as if their own assumptions are self-evident, while the assumptions of their adversaries are illicit ideological distortions.

On the authority of Science, this type of work has invaded the space that the retreat of philosophy and theology has created. Whether it should be called public philosophy or theology or something else is not important. I have used the term “secular political theology” because of the salvific and sacred role given to “Science”. It is similar to how the economist Robert Nelson has described modern economics as a form of theology. From the perspective of Christian theology it is, of course, an idolatrous use of the scientific practices. Moreover, because of its lack of self-consciousness, it is poor theology. However, I believe that the academic discipline of theology provides tools for critically analyzing how scientists function as theologians. At their best, theologians have a self-critical hermeneutical awareness that scientists often lack and instruments to analyze ontological assumptions, ideas of human nature, narratives, and frameworks that tend to be invisible for the latter.

Lakoff's cognitive science

It is not my intention here to give a detailed description of Lakoff's and Pinker's scientific work and even less to evaluate it, something I, of course, lack the competence to do. But some understanding of their claims is necessary as a background to the following discussion. I will give more space to Lakoff's theory, both because it is less known than the type of evolutionary psychology that Pinker represents, and because Lakoff directly advocates one comprehensive moral and political theory in a way Pinker does not, at least not explicitly.

Lakoff has developed his basic theory together with the philosopher Mark Johnson.¹⁷ They begin their book *Philosophy in the Flesh* with the following three statements:

- The mind is inherently embodied.
- Thought is mostly unconscious.
- Abstract concepts are largely metaphorical.

They then continue: “These are three major findings of cognitive science. More than two millennia of a priori philosophical speculation about these aspects of reason are over. Because of these discoveries, philosophy can never be the same again.”¹⁸ Then follows 600 pages of deconstruction and reconstruction of the whole philosophical enterprise from Plato to Quine.

The mind being in the body means that our way of thinking—our conceptual structures—is dependent on our basic sensory and motor systems. Moreover, most of our thought operations take place below cognitive awareness. To understand even a simple statement, our brain has to perform many and extremely complex processes. To a large extent, these processes are not accessible for conscious awareness and control. A crucial example of this is that our thought is to a large degree metaphorical, which has to do with the projection in our brains of “activation patterns from sensorimotor areas to higher

cortical areas.”¹⁹ What they call “primary metaphors” have their sources in sensorimotor domains such as vision, size, bodily orientation, space, motion, exertion of force, object manipulation, and touch. These metaphors are instantiated in early childhood via neural connections and, once formed, are used for forming complex metaphors and metaphor systems. Hence, human thought is inescapably and irreducibly metaphorical and only a small part is literal and propositional. “Those metaphors are realized in our brains physically and are mostly beyond our control. They are consequences of the nature of our brains, our bodies, and the world we inhabit.”²⁰

Lakoff and Johnson show, for example, how we conceptualize “argument” as a war. It is not just a question of words; it shapes how we understand and perform argument. “We can actually win or lose arguments. We see the person we are arguing with as an opponent. We attack his positions and we defend our own. ... If we find a position indefensible, we can abandon it and take a new line of attack.”²¹ Metaphors can develop in very different ways and how they develop, which ones are chosen, and how they are organized in relation to each other vary among cultures and subcultures. “In general, which values are given priority is partly a matter of the subculture one lives in and partly a matter of personal values. The various subcultures of a mainstream culture share basic values but give them different priorities.”²² They are framed differently.

“Frames” or “scripts” are simple mental structures with roles, relations, and scenarios and words are “defined relative to conceptual frames.”²³ Frames are combined in larger and more complex narratives. Such narratives “are frames that tell a story. ... A narrative has a point to it, a moral. It is about how you should live your life—or how you shouldn’t. It has emotional content: events that make you sad or angry or in awe.”²⁴

So metaphors, frames, and narratives shape—mostly unconsciously—common sense, worldviews, political discourse, morality, and religion, but they also mould theoretical thought—philosophy, political theory, economics, and so forth. Lakoff makes radical claims. He contends that he is placing moral and political thinking, as well as our understanding of rationality as such, on a scientific basis. He can make his claims because his cognitive science provides him with what he calls a “higher rationality”.²⁵ “What is at stake is the deepest form of freedom, the freedom to control our own minds. To do that, we must make the unconscious conscious.”²⁶ So science helps him unveil the unconscious workings of our moral and political thinking. Until his scientific discoveries, humankind—scholars and ordinary people alike—has been imprisoned in the unconscious workings of our embodied mind. Now, thanks to Lakoff’s research, we are offered instruments to control our own minds and to influence other people’s minds, make them free to see “rightly”.

For the wider public, Lakoff has become best known for his books on American politics. He himself also says that this is the most important application of the theory.²⁷ His immediate interest is to show how the

Democratic Party can win elections. But implied in his analysis of American politics is also his claim to be able to accurately describe, say, the nature of economics, how the welfare state works, or the reality foreign policy deals with. Scholars working in these fields often fail to develop adequate theories because they are misled by the unconscious workings of their own minds. Because Lakoff can control his own mind, he can see clearly what others fail to see.

One might think that a more plausible interpretation of his theory would be to say that all our thinking is shaped by metaphors, framings, and narratives, and that we therefore have to discard all claims to a privileged seeing behind metaphors and narratives. Metaphors, framing, and narratives do not imprison us; instead they are generally well functioning tools for our interaction with the world. Sometimes they mislead us, but more often they function well. So Lakoff can also say. “It would be very strange to say that our most productive, efficient, and effective form of reasoning, the reasoning necessary for survival in the everyday world, is irrational. It is only in those limited contexts in which the classical view of rationality is appropriate that such reasoning appears to be ‘irrational.’”²⁸ However, if this is true, then Lakoff has only helped us better understand some central aspects of our language use and our reasoning; he has not helped us find a new way to freedom, to the control of our minds. Our rationality already works quite well. He cannot, on the basis of cognitive science, make claims to special insights into economics, politics, and morality. But in practice, he does give the impression that not only can he provide tools for political campaigning, he is also able to see directly “how it is”, what is morally, politically, economically, and even religiously “right”, both “morally” and “factually”.

Another complication is that Lakoff’s theoretical work in cognitive science, his special area of research, has not reached general acceptance in the cognitive science community. On the contrary, it is highly controversial and represents a minority view. Many would say that much of what Lakoff describes as functioning metaphors are dead metaphors that function non-metaphorically. Pinker takes a middle position. We do think with metaphors, they help our reasoning, but we are not shackled by them in the way Lakoff seems to imply. Even without his “higher rationality” people can analyze them, consciously use them in different ways, modify and develop them, and so on.²⁹ My point here is not that Lakoff is wrong; I only wish to point out that even in the area of his own research specialty, his theory is controversial and much criticized (just as Pinker’s is). As regards Lakoff’s political analysis, in his view the most important application of his theory, what he says is much less founded on research.

Cognitive science and political analysis

So far, Lakoff has published three large works, more theoretical in nature, on politics, *Moral Politics* (1996, 2002), *Whose Freedom* (2006), and *The Political*

Mind (2008), written as works of cognitive science. He has also written two smaller handbooks for activists, *Don't Think of an Elephant!* (2004) and *Thinking Points* (2006). Interestingly enough, although written for activists, *Don't Think of an Elephant!* is the most cited of all these works in scholarly books and articles.

Our moral thinking is, he claims, determined by a limited number of basic metaphors, such as health, purity, strength, order, wealth, freedom, care, nurturing, light, uprightness, and balance.³⁰ They are all about well-being. However, the core of Lakoff's analysis of morality comprises his answer to the question: What binds these metaphors together into moral worldviews? What he proposes is that our moral orientation, and therefore our political and religious orientations too, are shaped by two different idealized family models, the strict father model and the nurturant parent model.

Although he (and Johnson) did once admit that the idea that these two family models organize people's worldviews is "more highly speculative" or in need of more empirical investigation,³¹ it is this theory that completely determines his approach to morality, politics, and religion. In his later political books, all reservations have vanished. The proposal is not described as a speculative hypothesis but as a strongly supported theory, as the starting point for his analysis. However, the step from analyzing moral and political thinking in terms of this or that conceptual metaphor to seeing these family models as the fundamental parts of two moral and political worldviews is enormous. But he provides no evidence of any sort, other than his own rational reconstruction of the language used in political, moral, and religious discourse. We should also note that his work on conceptual metaphors, framing, and narrative may well be found useful, for political analysis too, even if one rejects his family model. The latter does not necessarily follow on from the former.

The basic assumption in the strict father model is that "life is a struggle for survival"³² and that children have to be prepared for a life of hard competition. The emphasis is therefore on the creation of the self-discipline, responsibility, and independence that are necessary for success in this competitive world. This is attained by an up-bringing that stresses punishment and rewards. Success is a reward for being moral, and it is immoral to reward people who have not earned this reward by succeeding in competition with others. It is a strictly meritocratic morality. The father is responsible for upholding and defending this moral order at all costs. The father also protects the family against external threats. The mother has responsibility for the day-to-day care, but also for upholding the authority of the father.

In the second model, the nurturant parent model, the focus is on the attachment of the child to the parents. The central values are empathy and nurturance. Instead of obedience, personal development and self-realization are encouraged. Children develop through their positive relationships with others and they develop independence and responsibility insofar as they themselves

have been nurtured and respected. Therefore they in turn can take care of and respect others. The aim is that they shall be happy and realize themselves and learn to become nurturant themselves. This assumes a world that is nurturant. “It must be a world governed maximally by empathy”, he says.³³

These models, Lakoff claims, unconsciously shape people’s moral and political beliefs. Humankind or the nation can be seen as one family. God, Universal Reason, the government, or the values of a society can be seen as the parent. If God is seen as a strict father, morality is seen as a law to follow. In contrast, if God is understood as a nurturant parent—God as love—then a morality of caring and compassion is emphasized. In moral philosophy, Kantian ethics is a prime example of strict father morality. Universal reason is conceptualized as a strict father.³⁴ Utilitarianism and virtue ethics are both basically nurturant, although he thinks utilitarianism is inadequate for other reasons (having a typical Old Enlightenment view of reason).

In politics, the nation is conceptualized as a family with the government as the parent. But this metaphor “the nation as a family” is then understood in terms of the two different family models, which leads to two very different political ideologies. He believes in fact that nothing explains American politics better than these two family models. This theory is thus superior to theories or results from economics, sociology, political science, and history. Moreover, these disciplines are themselves unconsciously shaped by these family models. The ideas of “Economic Man” and “Rational Actors” are, for example, typical strict father conceptions.

Most Americans, he says, have both models “engrained” in their brains and have been culturally exposed to both. Many use the first model in some areas of life; the second in other areas. These people he calls “biconceptuals”.³⁵ In general, he claims that one can divide Americans into three groups of roughly equal size, conservatives, progressives, and biconceptuals. The biconceptuals are not moderates. Lakoff believes it is wrong to think in terms of a continuous right-left spectrum, with moderates in the middle. Instead we have two radically different worldviews and correlative political programs. It is a struggle between a “fundamentally democratic” and a “fundamentally antidemocratic” mode of thought.³⁶ He therefore thinks that it is a mistake to use triangulation strategies or turn to the middle to reach the biconceptuals.

The reason conservatives have succeeded in dominating recent American politics is, he claims, because they have been much better than progressives at formulating their political goals in convincing metaphors that link up with these unconscious family models. The progressive illusion—the Old Enlightenment view—is to think that rational arguments will win the debate. But the human brain does not work like that. If progressives try to argue inside the conservative frames, they will lose. They will also lose if they simply try to deny the conservative metaphorical framework. In both cases, the issues are still debated on conservative premises. “Conservative” neural circuits are activated. So if

progressives are to be able to reclaim the political initiative, they have to change the metaphorical frames that determine the political debate. “In politics, whoever frames the debate tends to win the debate.”³⁷ He often says that the point is to change people’s brains. It seems that he thinks that this happens through pure repetition. “When a word or phrase is repeated over and over for a long period of time, the neural circuits that compute its meaning are activated repeatedly in the brain.”³⁸ This is a strange way of putting it. If all thought is physical, how do you change people’s minds without changing their brains? What he means seems to be that repetition eventually creates permanent neural circuits. Different uses of the word “freedom” create different neural circuits. Presumably he is making a conscious use of the rhetorical power of referring to neuroscience, although it does not really add anything. It simply sounds more effective to say that you change people’s brains, rather than just their minds or views.³⁹

In the following discussion, I will provide just a few examples. The books mentioned are filled with analyses that cover most political areas: economics, the environment, family policy, foreign policy, law and the legal system, religion, bioethics, and so on.

First, a foreign policy example. How should one describe what happened on September 11, 2001? Was it a crime or an act of war? As has often been pointed out, it makes a big practical difference if one thinks in terms of “police action” or in terms of “war on terror”. However, Lakoff takes his analysis further, using his family models. Why did the Bush government choose the latter language? The reason is, he says, that the war language activates fear and thereby “reinforces the strict father model.” It helped the Bush administration to centralize government and “run the country as if it were the military” with a morality of obedience. Because a war on terror has no end, this militarized style of government can be made permanent.⁴⁰

The progressive view, which he himself defends, is a moral foreign policy based on the values of empathy, caring, and responsibility. It has the dual goal of both “protecting our freedoms and extending them to others”.⁴¹ Going to war should be a last resort. In the case of Islamic terrorism, in addition to promoting economic development, one should also support and try to strengthen moderate Islam, help to replace the madrasas with moderate Islamic schools, and develop “cultural missions to Islamic countries”.⁴²

Secondly, an example from economics.⁴³ According to Lakoff, the conservative view is that the free market, as a strict father, rewards the disciplined and punishes the undisciplined. The market is completely rational, and the link between discipline and prosperity is true on an individual level. Everyone has the same opportunity. This market system is thus moral. Government is understood as wasteful and inefficient when it interferes with the free market. Government regulations (such as the testing of new medicines and environmental rules) limit the freedom of profit for individuals and corporations.

“Taxation of the rich is, to conservatives, punishment for doing what is right and succeeding at it.”⁴⁴ Conservatives are against unions, labor legislation, and tort laws, because they also limit profits. He can even say that conservatives think that health care, education, and social security should only be available according to how much people are able to pay.⁴⁵ Furthermore, for moral reasons, conservatives are “against nurturance and care” as such, “against social programs that take care of people”.⁴⁶ They destroy the connection between goodness (discipline) and prosperity (reward). If this depiction is correct, consistent conservatives are not only against the welfare state, but also against all non-governmental social programs, for example charity work by churches.

The progressive view, however, sees the government as the nurturant parent, and the market is not a natural entity but a constructed tool that should serve the common good, serve the nation as family. Therefore, regulations are protective measures, taxes pay for the common infrastructure, unions are important for the power balance and lead to better salaries and more moral work places, and tort laws force companies to give higher priority to safety.

A third example is the abortion debate.⁴⁷ He uses two different strategies. In the first one, he presents the different descriptions of what happens in an abortion. Conservatives describe it as the taking of innocent life and it is the responsibility of the strict father to defend innocent life. Progressives, on the other hand, see an abortion as the removal of “a group of cells that is not an independent, viable, and recognizable human being.”⁴⁸ The nurturing parent has empathy with the woman with an unwanted pregnancy. Conservatives and progressives describe different realities. So far Lakoff provides a quite common description of the issue at hand, although framed by his two family models.

However Lakoff claims that for conservatives, there is more to this issue. A pregnant unmarried teenage girl has demonstrated her lack of self-discipline and therefore deserves punishment, taking the consequences of her action by giving birth to the child. Moreover, both this girl and the woman who chooses a career instead of motherhood threaten the authority of fathers or husbands over women, that is, they threaten the strict father morality as such. So the primary issue is not defending life, but defending the strict father morality. Forcing a teenage girl to give birth is thus more a case of punishing the girl rather than defending innocent life.⁴⁹

These examples are typical of Lakoff’s political analysis. They are radically dualistic, good and evil are contrasted, progressives say what they mean, while conservatives often seem to have another (more sinister) aim than the stated one. He gives little evidence for his descriptions. He does not use political studies, ethnographic investigations, surveys, or historical studies. Sometimes a political speech is analyzed or a conservative child-rearing manual is discussed, but most of the time he only extrapolates from his two family models what the pure conservative and the progressive views are. In the latter case he just seems to

describe his own political views; in the former, he creates an extreme pure version that grows out of his own conception of the strict father model.

Cognitive science and Christian theology

The Republican and Democratic parties consist of coalitions of highly dissimilar groups that have changed over time. For some decades now, the so-called Religious or Christian Right has been an influential group in the Republican Party. This has led Lakoff to analyze the possible connections between Christianity and morality, providing a scientific description of Christian theologies.

He does not identify Christianity with the political right. Instead he finds two sorts of Christianity, a strict father Christianity with an authoritarian image of God and a nurturing Christianity with God as a nurturing parent.⁵⁰ The latter form is the dominant form, but the former has an important role in radical political conservatism. His thesis is that an authoritarian image of God is correlated with conservative political views, just as a nurturing image of God is correlated with progressivism.⁵¹ Conservative Christians think in terms of moral book-keeping, in which a positive balance is a requisite for reaching heaven.⁵² He then sees mutual metaphorical connections between this religious-moral accounting system, support for a free market economy, and a strict father morality. Progressive Christians not only think of God as a nurturing parent, but also Christ as “the embodiment of the progressive values of empathy and responsibility”,⁵³ and grace as care. Humans are, moreover, not understood as obedient children subordinated to a cosmic father, but as responsible and mature adults.

Although he claims that there is a correlation between image of God and morality, he does not think that religious belief and practice have an independent causal role. Instead, he strongly stresses that authentic morality is grounded in built-in feelings of empathy, not in God or, for that matter, in abstract reason. Religion can never make any cognitive claims, neither in the moral sphere nor in the understanding of reality. Religion is only an expression of moral feelings that have their origin outside religion.⁵⁴ It is thus imperative to keep religion strictly separate from science and public life. Any language of a divine creative purpose or teleology transgresses this border. Evolution denies all ideas of purpose, of unchanging essences, and of absolute categorization, and therefore also the idea of a moral law that makes certain actions, such as assisted suicide, aborting fetuses with genetic effects, or all violence, intrinsically evil. Progressive Christians, he says, tend to replace such a moral law account with virtue ethics, which does not require lists of rules, but is instead defined in terms of flourishing, happiness, and a good society. Pope Benedict XVI’s linking of freedom and truth, and his criticism of freedom as autonomy, is for Lakoff an example of this illegitimate Christian fundamentalism. So is saying that all humans are equal *because* they are made in the image of God. The correct

progressive view, according to Lakoff, seems to be that equality is based on “the Enlightenment idea that we are equally rational”.⁵⁵ However he does not explain what being “equally rational” could possibly mean. Strangely enough, he encourages at the same time progressive Christians to realize “the values of Jesus” through “political action—action through the state.” Following Jesus “means being a political activist”.⁵⁶ It is difficult to understand how to reconcile these positions.

Again he provides little evidence for his descriptions of these two types of Christianities or for the type of correlation between the image of God and political views he proposes. The question of correlation could be studied empirically, as has in fact been done. In the large Baylor Religion Survey published in 2006 the population was divided according to their image of God.⁵⁷ In addition to atheists, the investigators posited four different images, including authoritarian (type A) and benevolent (type B), which could be seen as analogous to Lakoff’s two images of God.⁵⁸ If Lakoff’s correlation hypothesis is correct, we should expect to find two statistically clearly separated groups in respect to moral and political views, even granted the existence of biconceptuals. This we do not find. On moral issues such as abortion and gay marriage we do find clear differences, but not even here is the difference so large, sharp and binary as Lakoff’s thesis suggests. For example, 23% of the A-group and 17% of the B-group think abortion is wrong in all circumstances, and 81% of A and 66% of B are against gay marriage. However, when we come to questions about economics and justice, these larger differences do not appear at all. When asked if the government should distribute wealth more evenly, 57% of type A and 53% of type B agree. Should the government regulate businesses more closely?—A 60% and B 63% say yes. Should the government protect the environment better?—A 76% and B 81% answer yes.

Such results can, of course, be interpreted in many ways (for example, more women and more African-Americans than white males have an authoritarian image of God—in itself interesting in terms of Lakoff’s theory), but it cannot be construed as confirming Lakoff’s thesis. If anything, it disconfirms it.⁵⁹

Pinker’s evolutionary psychology

Lakoff’s views have encountered both praise and strong criticisms from the scientific community. Steven Pinker is one of the strong critics. Lakoff and Pinker have the same scientific background: Noam Chomsky’s linguistics. Lakoff famously turned against Chomsky.⁶⁰ Pinker is much closer to Chomsky, but differs especially as regards the role that evolutionary psychology has in his thought. Pinker can summarize his view of the mind in the following way. “The mind is a system of organs of computation, designed by natural selection to solve the kinds of problems our ancestors faced in their foraging way of life, in particular, understanding and outmaneuvering objects, animals, plants, and other people.” This implies that the “mind is organized into modules or mental organs,

each with a specialized design that makes it an expert in one arena of interaction with the world.”⁶¹ So we are born with these specialized mental organs. Learning “is made possible by innate machinery designed to do the learning.” The fact that there are many different mental organs means “that there are several innate learning machines, each of which learns according to a particular logic.”⁶² We are not born as blank slates, nor should the mind be understood as a general-purpose organ that can, through environmental factors, be shaped in radically different ways. The modules work in relative independence and according to different logics and the behavioral outcome is a result of a struggle between these modules in specific environmental contexts.

Evolutionary psychology, the result of this combination of a computational view of the mind and evolutionary biology, could thus be described as engineering in reverse, explaining psychological traits and behaviors in evolutionary terms, that is in terms of the adaptive roles these have had for the survival and reproduction of humanity. “The various problems for our ancestors were subtasks of one big problem for their genes, maximizing the number of copies that made it into the next generation.”⁶³ This does not mean that every behavior can be given an adaptive explanation. They can be by-products from other selected changes or evolutionary accidents. Moreover, humans have created social environments and institutions that invite people to make, from the perspective of reproduction, non-adaptive choices. He also stresses that the ultimate goal of the genes is not the same as the goals for persons.

This position seems to imply the fundamental importance of cumulative cultural developments and social institutions. The difference between modern societies and the Stone Age is enormous. In order to explain behavior or understand moral and political issues, cultural, political, and economic history is usually much more important than explanations provided by evolutionary psychology, even if one accept Pinker’s position as a whole. He may agree, but that is not the way he writes. Like Lakoff, he stresses psychological universals and downplays or ignores historical, cultural, and institutional factors.

Pinker claims that science must be strictly separated from ethics and politics. They represent different systems. Science “treats people as material objects” and ethics treats them as “rational, free-willed agents.”⁶⁴ Both are important, but they should not be mixed. He claims that “for the most part” he tries to avoid making political claims and that science cannot solve the necessary tradeoffs between different values. He only wants to inform us about the context and the limits human nature sets.⁶⁵

Such a simple split between values and descriptions has often been criticized. Individual descriptions of a certain state of affairs do not exist separate from wider conceptions, narratives and ontologies. Moreover, the descriptions determine to a large extent what is politically and morally possible and even desirable. Much of what Lakoff defends is, from Pinker’s perspective, politically misguided, not just for political or moral reasons, but simply because

it is impossible given human nature. Despite his contrary claims, a book like Pinker's *The Blank Slate* does provide a comprehensive moral-political worldview. He discusses everything from the bringing up of children to which political worldview is to be preferred. His views basically correspond to secular European liberalism (which makes him a "conservative" in the American use of the word). He is, for example, socially and morally liberal (conservative morality often builds on irrational moral feelings), defends the market economy and a limited state (suits human nature), is very critical of "progressive" pedagogical theories (disregard how the mind works), strongly defends liberal feminism against dominant gender and queer theories (which deny the actual biological differences that exist between the genders), and criticizes modern and postmodern art (militantly denies human nature).

More generally, Pinker unleashes a sustained attack on the "disembodied" views of human nature that he thinks dominate much of the academic world and that give support to many untenable, even disastrous, moral and political views. According to Pinker, every society must have some idea of human nature. How we conceive human nature determines how we act. For a long time the Judeo-Christian conception dominated Western culture, and still, he thinks, much of popular thinking in America. The intellectual elite has, he continues, left this understanding behind and the majority has replaced it with the doctrine of the blank slate, the idea that we are mostly shaped by our environment, and only to a small extent limited by a given human nature. This doctrine, which evolutionary psychologists often call the Standard Social Science Model, "has become the secular religion of modern intellectual life."⁶⁶ Yet, Pinker says, we know that it is scientifically false. Even the Judeo-Christian view is closer to the truth. Humans are not so "socially constructable" as many people in the humanities and the social sciences claim. He agrees that "culture" plays a role, but most of the time he stresses how our nature determines how humans think and act.

So it might seem strange to criticize him, as Lakoff does, for proposing a disembodied view of reason. Lakoff is critical of Pinker's modular view of the mind. It implies, he says, "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." It is also this view of language and thinking as "algorithmic symbol manipulation",⁶⁷ Lakoff thinks, that makes it possible for Pinker to defend the idea of a universal disembodied reason as a normative ideal and to criticize Lakoff for relativism. Pinker can agree with Lakoff that "'universal disembodied reason' is not a good theory of how individual people instinctively think", but it is still "a normative ideal that we should collectively strive for in grounding our beliefs and decisions".⁶⁸ Otherwise we end up in relativism. Lakoff, on the other hand, thinks this is

impossible. Our minds simply do not work like that. But one may still ask, is not his own claim to a “higher rationality” similar to Pinker’s attempt?

From Pinker’s perspective, it is instead Lakoff who—despite all his talk about embodiment—in practice ignores the limits human nature and material and social reality place on our moral and political possibilities. What Lakoff thinks is moral always seems possible. There appear to be few human limits, hardly any economic limits, no conflict of goals, no unintended consequences, no conflicts of interest, no tragedy, and (when he talks about his own policy suggestions) no limits of knowledge. So Pinker thinks that despite Lakoff claim to the opposite, he actually lends support to the “blank slate” ideas put forward in recent social and political thinking. Sociobiology and evolutionary psychology have been harshly criticized, because they are often assumed to support conservative politics. Pinker replies by pointing to the devastating effects the idea of the blank slate, often combined with the idea of the noble savage, has had in recent political history.⁶⁹ Extreme examples are the attempts at social engineering in the French, the Russian, and the Chinese revolutions.⁷⁰ But he also thinks that the social constructionism and the denial of human nature he finds in much psychology, anthropology, sociology, gender science, and queer theory has had very harmful effects on ordinary people, for example in the areas of child rearing, education, gender relations, and crime policy.

Pinker claims that blank slate assumptions have governed what he describes as the dominant sociological tradition (a tradition that he traces from Plato via Marx, Durkheim, Weber, to current postmodernism) that sees society as a “cohesive organic entity and its individual citizens” as “mere parts” and as “social by their very nature”.⁷¹ He contrasts this to the economic or social contract tradition (from Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Locke to current rational choice and “economic man” theories) which says that “society is an arrangement negotiated by rational, self-interested individuals.” The latter tradition is for Lakoff the prime example of the denial of the embodiment of reason, while Pinker thinks that this perspective is scientifically supported by evolutionary psychology. “Reciprocal altruism, in particular, is just the traditional concept of the social contract restated in biological terms.”⁷² In other words, when translated into contemporary politics, evolutionary psychology explains political and economic action in terms of rational self-interest. Just as neo-classical economic theory assumes stable preferences (material gain), Pinker’s evolutionary psychology assumes universal desires. However, neo-classical economic theory also assumes a view of human rationality that not only Lakoff but even Pinker otherwise can admit is, at least in part, descriptively misleading (Pinker does describe Locke as the archetypal blank slate thinker). Still, he excludes it from his charge of blank slate assumptions.

The contested evolutionary theory

Both Pinker and Lakoff use evolutionary theory as support for their moral-political views. From the very start, Darwin's theory has been used as scientific support for a whole range of contradictory moral and political views and as an effective tool to criticize adversaries. Although the views defended were to a large extent taken from elsewhere, Darwinism has often been a powerful form of support for various moral and political worldviews and as a tool to deconstruct traditional moral and religious justifications for, say, "human dignity", the "intrinsic value of human life", or "equality".⁷³ For example, the eugenics movements were largely driven by the scientific establishments. Although these movements defended the opposite of the blank slate idea, Pinker emphasizes that eugenic politics were more often driven by progressives than conservatives, while the main opposition came from Catholics and conservative Protestants. It was, however, the central role of Darwinism and eugenics in National Socialism that discredited references to human biological nature for a long time and this is still used as an argument against contemporary evolutionary psychology. Lakoff claims that Pinker interprets "Darwin in a way reminiscent of social Darwinists".⁷⁴ Although Pinker laments this guilt by association, he himself does, as we have seen, the same with the positions he criticizes.⁷⁵

The debate between Lakoff and Pinker shows that evolutionary theory is still used in the same ideologically flexible way it was used a century ago. The type of engineering in reverse that Pinker advocates does not seem to solve much, as any behavior seems open for a bewildering number of different explanations. For example, when discussing the evolutionary origin of religion, Pinker mentions one theory. But there is a whole set of different evolutionary explanations, although some may be complementary. In addition, there is the problem of the many, highly diverse definitions of religion that different researchers work with.⁷⁶

For Pinker, who often uses the language of competition, evolutionary psychology tends to support what he calls a more tragic view of human nature and society. "A thoroughly noble anything is an unlikely product of natural selection, because in the competition among genes for representation in the next generation, noble guys tend to finish last."⁷⁷ Lakoff thinks that "competition" in this context is a misleading metaphor that implicitly misdescribes society and makes competition and self-interest natural. Lakoff himself, using the ideas of mirror neuron circuitry and group selection, argues "that empathy is the natural state, but has to be monitored, modulated, enhanced, and sometimes shut off."⁷⁸ He can say that the "New Enlightenment comes with a new consciousness" which places "empathy and responsibility ... at the heart of the moral vision on which our democracy is based" and this is based on "the biology of empathy".⁷⁹ Again we see the contrast between strict father and nurturant parent conceptions. Pinker would say, I guess, that Lakoff, for all practical purposes, provides a contemporary version of the image of the noble savage. Pinker is also critical of

the view that group selection (in itself, he claims, a mistaken theory) favors altruistic behavior, and notes that this part of Darwinism was especially popular among Nazis.⁸⁰

Yet, although the tradition Pinker defends is often seen as having a more pessimistic view of the limits of human nature, it also tends to have a more optimistic view of human rationality. Humans as individuals are more rational actors than most sociologists think and more rational than is implied by the picture Lakoff offers. While Lakoff claims that the political order he defends is rooted in human nature (though he does not explain where the conservatives come from), Pinker assumes that a rational political order has to transcend human nature. Human reason is, Pinker says, open and flexible. It can to a certain extent override less desirable tendencies in human nature.

Human morality

Both Pinker and Lakoff believe that human morality is built on moral emotions developed during human evolution. But they disagree completely on what this means. Pinker can follow Jonathan Haidt⁸¹ and talk about five innate moral psychological systems: harm, fairness, community, authority, and purity.⁸² They are universal but they can be ranked differently and applied to different areas of social life. This explains the difference between cultures, but also between liberals and conservatives in contemporary United States. Liberals primarily emphasize harm and fairness, while conservatives give roughly as much emphasis to all five areas. Haidt thinks that recognizing this may help the discussion between liberals and conservatives.

However, Pinker mainly stresses another point; how our moral sense may lead us astray. When described in this way, our moral sense seems to Pinker to be a mixture of principles of justice, status ideas, and notions of purity and impurity. Moreover, human beings are guided too much by irrational moral feelings and taboos. He thinks it is often better to talk about costs and benefits rather than in terms of moral/immoral. He does recognize that an evolution-shaped empathy strengthened and further developed by reason and knowledge may hinder the worst side of human life. But his emphasis is on the irrationality and arbitrariness of moral emotions. Society can suffer because of too much morality, because rational politics is hindered by moral emotions. It is not only conservative gut reactions against cloning that are irrational, but also the liberal moralism that governs people's thought about climate change.

Morality can, Pinker thus argues, be built neither on the moral sense nor on an account of human nature. Humans are violent. But we cannot draw ethical conclusions from this correct account. Our ethics should instead be guided by what is best for human society, and be based on the idea that we should act as we would like to be treated ourselves (that is, harm and fairness!).⁸³ However, in understanding "what is best" one has to consider the limits of human nature. Not everything we think is good is possible. In this sense, our accounts of human

nature are relevant for our ethical and political reasoning. At the same time, we strive for a thinking that is as rational, universal, impartial, and impassionate as possible. And for Pinker it usually seems quite obvious what is best. A certain form of secular and utilitarian cultural imagery is simply taken for granted as natural. He excludes, before the arguments begin, most alternatives to his own thinking as illegitimate and irrational.⁸⁴

Empirical studies of morality have recently become a growth industry. However, these studies have not led to any new consensus. We see rather replications in new forms of earlier debates in moral philosophy and theology. The very different positions of Pinker and Lakoff are examples of this. The empirical studies they cite do not, by themselves, help resolve their differences because their claims about the nature of morality are embedded in philosophical, political, and moral differences. For example, they agree that morality is based on moral sentiments, that people are bad at calculating probability, and that human reason is flexible. However, they draw very different conclusions from these shared viewpoints. For Pinker, they lead to a skeptical attitude toward much ordinary morality and a defense of rational actor models. Pinker also thinks that it is these limitations in human rationality that create the negative and critical attitude toward the market system that we find in Lakoff's writings. The complex functioning of the market is simply difficult for the human mind to grasp.⁸⁵

We have already seen that Lakoff thinks that the use of metaphors, frames, and prototypes in ethical reasoning is not only unavoidable, but that it functions well in most contexts. On the other hand, he is critical of the conception of rationality that rational-actor models assume. To begin with, real world situations are stylized to fit a rational-actor model, which sometimes is useful, but more often means that much or most of the relevant data are ignored. Moreover, he says, the model cannot deal with intrinsic values. Multiple values are reduced to single numbers, and the model is not just descriptive, it is in itself prescriptive.⁸⁶

While Pinker gives the impression that affections mostly disrupt our ethical analysis, Lakoff claims not only that moral thinking is intrinsically emotionally engaged, but also that the affections are a necessary part of our rationality. We cannot think adequately without them. Our rationality as such is intrinsically moral and engaged. "Rationality almost always has a major moral dimension. The idea that human rationality is purely mechanical, disengaged, and separable from moral issues is a myth, a myth that is harmful when we live our lives according to it."⁸⁷

This type of discussion between Pinker and Lakoff is not new. Both give one-sided and simplistic images of the history of moral and political thinking. Lakoff's writings give the impression that he is revolutionizing moral philosophy. But during the period of Enlightenment, there was no consensus about something like Lakoff's "Old Enlightenment" view. Not even Locke

defended the sort of “blank slate” view that Pinker attributes to him. And the kind of criticism Lakoff and Johnson level against Pinker has been common in moral philosophy and theology for a long time.⁸⁸ Moreover, Lakoff and Johnson are in part directly and strongly influenced by the work of people like Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, and Paul Ricoeur. This is clear when one reads Mark Johnson’s own work, but it is not visible in their co-written books or in Lakoff’s own books.⁸⁹

Which narrative?

We have seen that the “scientific” controversy between Lakoff and Pinker is conflated with deep moral and political differences. Yet, Pinker and Lakoff do agree that there is a clear overall difference between conservatives and liberals.⁹⁰ It is not, primarily, to do with socio-economic issues, nor with historical, cultural and moral divisions as such, but with something “deeper”. While Lakoff claims that two different family models, deeply engrained in the brain, shape people’s moral and political thinking, Pinker believes that we, to a large extent, are born with these differences. The specific content of current conservative and liberal views is of course historically constructed, but he thinks there is a connection between personality types and political preferences. He describes it as a difference between a more tragic and a more utopian vision.⁹¹ The tragic vision sees the human being as limited and governed by self-interest. The “noble savage” has never existed. Many primitive societies were and are more violent than even Europe was during the world wars. Politics and ethics must presuppose the limits of human knowledge and wisdom, and the limits to her ability to live a virtuous life. Societies develop slowly; traditions and institutions are expressions of the wisdom historically developed in a certain society. This leads to a skeptical attitude towards radical attempts to large-scale social changes.

Utopians, on the other hand, argue that human “nature” and the way we talk about it are shaped by the nature of the societies in which they exist. Both society and human “nature” are unfixed. If society changes, human “nature” will also change. The idea of a fixed human nature limits our imagination. So we should criticize what *is* in light of what *could be*.

As we have noted, Pinker thinks that science gives some support to the tragic vision, although he can envision a post-Darwinian left as a possibility. However, interestingly enough, both Pinker and Lakoff believe that the American constitution and the American political tradition are more congruent with human nature than any known alternative. It just so happens that they interpret this tradition in very different ways. According to Lakoff, this tradition is about the still ongoing process of progressive liberation. For him “progressive values” are identical with “traditional American values”, “the values that lie behind our Constitution”.⁹² American freedom, which is based on empathy and not on individualism, is built on a crucial idea of its founders: “to pool the common

wealth for the common good to build an infrastructure so that everyone could have the resource to achieve his or her individual goals.”⁹³ It is administered by the government and paid by taxes. So it is a mistake to think that it is capitalism and the free market that together with democracy constitute the basis for American society. The market is not a natural phenomenon, but a human construction “constructed to serve the common good.”⁹⁴ The progressives are thus the true and authentic carriers of the genuine American political tradition and also of authentic Christianity, while conservatism represents a radical break from the same tradition.

According to Pinker, on the other hand, the founders assumed the tragic view of Hobbes and Hume. That is the reason why they created a system of balancing powers, the division of power between the legislating, executive, and judicial powers. Human beings are driven by “the drive for dominance and esteem”.⁹⁵ The risk for corruption as well as concentration and misuse of power is thus large. The founders wanted to develop a political system that would reduce the risks as much as possible. Similarly, the declaration of freedom and human rights helped to liberate the individual in her pursuit of freedom and happiness. Instead of stealing what was wanted, people were encouraged to do business and trade and thus maximize the mutual exchange. In other words, the founders did not trust good will, but created a system in which self-seeking individuals could work for their mutual benefit.⁹⁶

We can thus see how both Lakoff and Pinker assume certain stories about USA and its founding, and these in turn are inserted into wider narratives about the development of humanity (group selection and empathy contra self-interest and competition), science (the source of their own authority), Enlightenment (Old and New), and so on. It can be described, in Lakoff’s terms, as the way they frame their analysis. And this framing, which is mostly implicit and not argued for, is more important for understanding them than the results from cognitive science they report. It is the implicit narratives (tending to converge to two large, partly overlapping, meta-narratives) much more than their detailed arguments that give force to their broader views about morality and politics.

Sociologist Christian Smith contends that American sociology is primarily “animated, energized, and made significant by one of two historical narrative traditions”. This describes well the difference between Lakoff and Pinker. On one side we have “the inspiring drama” of “Liberal Progress” and on the other “the more sobering satire” of “Ubiquitous Egoism”. Both, however, are derived from the Enlightenment master narrative, which in turn was, so Smith claims, a secular renarration of the Christian narrative. The division reflects “the optimistic and pessimistic themes that Christianity’s theological anthropology united but the Enlightenment split apart.”⁹⁷

In Lakoff’s drama, America is a carrier of the Enlightenment, progress, and true freedom. The world can be made different. Society can be built according to the progressive vision. The villains in this story are the radical conservatives,

both secular and religious, who want to overturn this progressive tradition and the society it is building. They want to redefine the very concept of freedom and they thereby threaten traditional American freedoms and thus democracy itself and even the very survival of the planet. American society is thus in the middle of an epic struggle for the future of the earth.

The problem is, so Lakoff's story goes, that even many progressives are imprisoned or blinded by bad philosophy and outdated science. This is precisely what makes someone like Pinker dangerous: he is not only a highly influential promoter of Old Enlightenment philosophy, outdated cognitive science, and older evolutionary psychology that minimizes the extent to which humans are hard wired for sympathy and cooperation, but also someone who uses these perspectives for attacking progressive views. So the stakes are high. But there is salvation. Lakoff himself has provided the decisive weapon to win this war between good and evil.

Pinker provides us with a very different set of stories, although the primary metastory of the Enlightenment, the progress of science, and the place in the story given to his own type of science are parallel to Lakoff's. We have already seen that he provides what he himself calls a more tragic view than the "utopian" story Lakoff provides. However, one can also say that it is part of Pinker's story that humanity, at least potentially, has reached a post-tragic situation. The emergence of modern science, free market economy, and democratic political systems has helped us enter the age of salvation. It has not created Lakoff's utopia, but it has created a world of relative prosperity and well-being, although large parts of the world have not yet entered this phase. So it seems that Pinker's tragic view of human nature and human society mainly concerns the past and other parts of the world, not the future in Western democracies. Certainly, Pinker thinks there is much irrationality in a society like the American, shaped as it is by bad science, opportunistic politics, and religious doctrines. But the constraints of the market and the democratic system, the basic rationality of science, and sheer common sense spare it from real disaster. Moreover, the tragic view itself makes us more humble and therefore saves us from the catastrophes created by utopian views of human nature.

So in this post-tragic thinking, Pinker's hope is built on science-informed reason together with the limits liberal democracy places on utopian action. This makes it important to maintain a strict border between science and non-science. Religion is one phenomenon that continuously threatens to transgress this border. He is therefore very critical of the decision of President Barack Obama to appoint Francis Collins to head the National Institutes of Health. The geneticist Collins, who was the leader of the Human Genome Project, is a Christian and has publicly discussed how he reconciles his Christian faith with science.⁹⁸ Pinker says that he does not advocate a litmus test disqualifying religious scientists. Collins can be a Christian privately as long as he keeps his religious convictions strictly separate from his public scientific work. However,

Collins has publicly defended a theistic account of evolution and has thereby transgressed the border between religion and science.⁹⁹ And this is serious, Pinker argues, because Collins, as head of the NIH, is “a public face of science, someone who commands one of the major bully pulpits for science in the country.”¹⁰⁰ Earlier he has sharply criticized the influence of religious thinking on bioethical discussions in America, for example in the President’s Council on Bioethics during President George W. Bush’s term of office. “How did the United States, the world’s scientific powerhouse, reach a point at which it grapples with the ethical challenges of twenty-first-century biomedicine using Bible stories, Catholic doctrine, and woolly rabbinical allegory?”¹⁰¹

Yet, if one is to believe Pinker’s own description of the academic world, the border between science and non-science is constantly blurred.¹⁰² So much of what is called science and scholarship is, he says, strongly tainted by ideology. Lakoff is simply an unusually blatant example of this. He provides many examples from the world of natural science. And if we are to believe him, most of the humanities and much social science are determined by ideology-driven false conceptions, by what he calls a secular religion. Moreover, says Pinker, such views have contributed to immense human catastrophes during the last century. Should he not then make such ideological beliefs a litmus test for certain positions? After all, they are both public and an integrated part of the scholarship in question. They have in the present world larger consequences for public life than religion. He does not criticize anything in Collins’ science. It is only Collins’ position that there is no conflict between science and Christian faith which he criticizes. He may also worry that Collins’ Christian faith may influence his moral convictions, but Pinker is adamant that we have to separate ethics and science, so why should Collins not have the right to hold moral positions that are different from Pinker’s? However that may be, Pinker seems to believe that religion represents a more sinister threat to science than non-religious ideologies (even if he describes them as secular religions) and therefore people with publicly held religious views should be kept away from at least certain positions of power. He does not give any reason why this should be so. I assume it is because this conflict between religion and science is such a constitutive part of the story he tells, and his animosity towards religion is immense (“useless, even harmful”).¹⁰³

Both Pinker and Lakoff assume that the modern world has left the age of religion and reached the age of Science. They presuppose what philosopher Charles Taylor describes as a “subtraction story”. It was the overcoming of religious dogma and religious moral ideas that paved the way for science and modern liberal democratic society and therefore for the creation of a new type of society of freedom and prosperity. The Enlightenment is the turning point. Religion can continue to exist as private beliefs, but when it becomes embodied in individual and social life it becomes dangerous, although Lakoff likes to see a domesticated good religion as an ally. Religion must then, by political, legal,

and intellectual means, be kept inside strict limits. We see clearly how the idea of Science functions for both Pinker and Lakoff exactly as John Gray says: as providing hope and silencing heretics.

The type of secularization narrative they share, in which the retreat of religion into the strictly private is a crucial part of the salvation story they assume, tends to function as an almost axiomatic assumption for a large part of Western culture, and especially the academy. Charles Taylor writes that such conceptions “function as unchallenged axioms, rather than as unshakeable arguments, and ... they rely on very shaky assumptions, are often grounded on illegitimate naturalizations of what are in fact profound cultural mutations, and in general survive largely because they end up escaping examination in the climate in which they are taken as the undeniable framework for any argument.” He continues: “The narrative dimension is extremely important, because the force of these [closed world structures] comes less from the supposed detailed argument (that science refutes religion, or that Christianity is incompatible with human rights), and much more from the general form of the narrative, to the effect that there was once a time when religion could flourish, but that time is past.”¹⁰⁴ This picture of a complete break between Christian and modern Europe¹⁰⁵ and the idea that science emerged primarily in conflict with the church and theology are long dead among historians.¹⁰⁶ But they live on as potent ideological instruments in the struggle for the future. Lakoff and Pinker reveal no awareness whatsoever about existing research in these fields and they seem to live in secular enclaves in which such assumptions are never questioned. The historian John Sommerville writes: “Secularism hasn’t had to explain itself for several generations and has become as muddled as religion was when it was simply dominant.”¹⁰⁷

Whose theology?

I have analyzed the work of Lakoff and Pinker as forms of public philosophy or secular political theology. Whatever it is called, it is badly done. What is striking is especially their lack of self-reflexivity and historical consciousness. Although both Pinker and especially Lakoff provide an abundance of arguments for the need for self-reflexivity, they mostly use them as tools for criticizing adversaries. Pinker’s transcendental ideal of a rational, universal, impartial, and impassionate reason and Lakoff’s higher rationality trade on a sort of positivism they (especially Lakoff) do not really believe in, but which supports the border between science and non-science that gives authority to their scientific reason. Lakoff and Johnson’s whole theory completely undermines any positivistic or semi-positivistic view. “Science is a social, cultural, and historic practice, knowledge is always situated, and what counts as knowledge may depend on matters of power and influence. ... Moreover, we strongly reject the myths that science provides the ultimate means of understanding everything and that humanistic knowledge has no standing relative to anything that calls itself

science.”¹⁰⁸ This does not lead to relativism, but to what they call an “embodied scientific realism”.¹⁰⁹ If this is true, Lakoff should critically reflect on his own situatedness and historicize both his own perspective and the positions he describes. He does not.

Both Lakoff and Pinker (although in somewhat different ways) claim that metaphors, narratives, and framings are powerful tools for human thinking. This does not make our thinking less rational. As economist Deirdre McCloskey says: “On the contrary it entails becoming more rational and more reasonable, because it puts more of what persuades serious people under the scrutiny of reason. Modernism was rigorous about a tiny part of reasoning and angrily unreasonable about the rest.”¹¹⁰ A meaningful discussion of moral, political, and theological issues requires us to try to self-critically discuss the narratives and framings we and others think with. The often competing intellectual frameworks and narratives inside which Lakoff and Pinker see the world are anything but self-evident.

Interestingly, several studies have shown that scientific knowledge about the nature of human thinking and decision theory does not make the researchers themselves better judges. Rather, the opposite is true. They keep their biases and inclinations, but have a higher assessment of their own abilities and lower assessments of other’s abilities. In other words, self-criticism decreases, with the result that the ability to judge well also decreases.¹¹¹

Lakoff describes how the decision-making biases of the human mind explain why hawks have an advantage over doves in foreign policy. The same biases can be used to explain Lakoff’s own optimistic progressivism. Two of the biases he mentions are “optimism bias” and “the illusion of control”. His belief that his cognitive science helps him control his own mind, which gives him a unique and unprecedented insight into why people think like they do and into reality as such, is an example of both. So is his conviction about what a progressive policy can do. Another bias is “the fundamental attribution error”, that “personality-based explanations, rather than situation-based explanations” are used to explain “the behaviour of others”, but not their own. This is often combined with a narrative of good heroes and bad villains. It is difficult to think of a better example of this than Lakoff’s own political theory.¹¹² Such biases, although expressed in a different way, also characterize Pinker’s work. Such knowledge could, of course, also lead to a more humble attitude. Pinker and Lakoff, however, are not examples of the latter, although they are quick to see the biases in each other.

Too much Christian political theology resembles Lakoff’s or Pinker’s way of working. Still, or partly because of that, theologians, even if not uniquely, may possess skills that are helpful in analyzing this type of secular political theology. Theologians self-consciously and critically deal with moral, political, and ontological issues. They discuss the role of worldviews, background convictions, metaphorical language, and narratives. They develop theories about

human nature and historical development. They are trained in interpreting texts. What is most conspicuous in reading the sort of literature Lakoff and Pinker produce is the lack of awareness of what happens when they extend their technical scientific work to produce “public philosophy”. They seldom reflect on the hermeneutical issues raised by the way they combine their scientific expertise with social and political theory, historical constructions, and ontological and moral assumptions. The habits of mind created within their own scientific fields continue to shape how they analyze and argue when they proceed to do political and moral analysis.

Modern Christian theology is also characterized by a self-critical historical consciousness that mostly is lacking in the works of Lakoff and Pinker. Social, moral, political, and religious institutions and traditions are historical phenomena, whatever role a fixed human nature plays and however critical one is of social constructionism (and theology tends to have more interest in thinking about human nature than is common in the humanities and the social sciences).¹¹³ Academic theological, moral, and political descriptions and reasoning are likewise historically situated and rooted in narrative contexts. Discussing the nature of moral and political reasoning, Lakoff’s frequent co-author the philosopher Mark Johnson writes that we are “synthesizing creatures” who are not only defined by our biological makeup but “are situated within a tradition and culture that supplies a stock of roles, scripts, frames, models, and metaphors that are our way of having a world, understanding it, and reasoning about it.”¹¹⁴ Johnson’s description also applies to the “synthesizing” work of Lakoff and Pinker, but they write as if it did not, as if their work somehow stands outside history. Theology as a discipline, on the other hand, has been forced for a long time not only to historicize the object of study, but also to historicize itself. It knows that it “*is* always beginning in the middle of things.”¹¹⁵ That is why it stresses the need for critical historical consciousness, hermeneutical awareness, and practical wisdom, all of which are needed in what Lakoff and Pinker attempt to do.

Moreover, as I have indicated, but have not had the space to develop, these two Western secular political theologies are themselves partly secularized and transformed products of Christianity. Robert Nelson, Christian Smith, John Milbank, and others have shown that the same applies to political science, economics, and sociology.¹¹⁶ The political and moral imaginations of Lakoff and Pinker are inscribed in the same competing main traditions as these other disciplines, but with a natural science slant. Their political theologies are not free-floating scientific doctrines, but are located in the ongoing struggle for the future of the USA, as one instance of the wider struggle in the formation of the modern world. The explicit or implicit idea of “Science as salvation” arose together with the modern nation-state, and the state’s struggle for supremacy, especially over traditional religion. The economist Robert Nelson writes: “The nation is in effect a modern church held together by the shared faith of a secular

religion.”¹¹⁷ Economists, he says, are theologians for this church. So are scientists such as Lakoff and Pinker. For them the church is America. Christian theology exists at the intersection of church, university, and nation. Insofar as Christian churches represent, to some extent, a different social reality, practice, and imagery which cannot completely be identified with the nation, they can help provide theology with other locations and perspectives from which to work. Such a theology is a partial outsider and has the potential to perceive what tends to remain invisible for much “mainstream” academic culture, so as to better see and analyze the background convictions, narratives, commitments, practices, and social realities that are taken for granted—in this case, for example, how science can function as a sort of political theology.

Christian theology may thus contribute to the desacralisation of Science, critiquing the myth of Science for the sake of both society and of the sciences themselves. As Conor Cunningham says, “Scientism is a massive intellectual pathology”¹¹⁸ that is destructive for a society’s moral and political thinking and practice as well as for the immensely important work of ordinary science.¹¹⁹ It is not only a matter of Lakoff and Pinker failing to deliver what they promise; for theologians, the problematic nature of their work demonstrates the need for theological critique of the uses of science and for more fruitful, albeit humble, uses of scientific work in moral and political discourse.

¹ George Lakoff, *The Political Mind: Why You Can't Understand 21st-Century Politics with an 18th-Century Brain* (New York: Viking, 2008), 13.

² *Ibid.*, 14. In their book on philosophy, Lakoff and Mark Johnson write that they want to contribute a “positive guidance for living” in such areas as morality, politics, economics, and religion. See *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 342.

³ Lakoff, *Mind*, 11.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵ Robert Wright, “The 2004 Time 100: Steven Pinker”, http://pinker.wjh.harvard.edu/about/media/2004_04_26_time.htm. Wright says “Every half-century, it seems, an eminent Harvard psychologist crystallizes an intellectual era.” Pinker now has, he thinks, the role William James and B. F. Skinner had before him. The zoologist Mark Ridley has said in a blurb about *The Blank Slate*: “The best book on human nature that I or anyone else will ever read.”

⁶ In theory, he confesses to a certain humility. “At this high altitude there is little difference between a specialist and a thoughtful layperson because nowadays we specialists cannot be more than laypeople in most of our own disciplines, let alone neighboring ones.” (Pinker, *How the Mind Works* [New York: Norton, 1997], x.) This humility does not characterize his actual writing, and I doubt he would produce bestsellers if it did.

⁷ Simon Blackburn, “Meet the Flintstones”, *The New Republic* 227, no. 22 (2002), 30.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁹ The whole material was then in a slightly edited form republished as Pinker/Lakoff, “Does Language Frame Politics?”, *Public Policy Research* 14, no. 1 (2007). The quote from Pinker is found on p. 60, and the quotes from Lakoff on p. 65. See further Pinker, *The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human Nature* (New York: Viking, 2007), 235-278, and Lakoff, *Mind*, 201-207.

¹⁰ Robert Nelson, *Economics as Religion: From Samuelson to Chicago and Beyond* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 19.

¹¹ Robert H. Nelson, *Reaching for Heaven on Earth: The Theological Meaning of Economics* (Savage: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1991), Nelson, *Economics*.

¹² For another example, see Arne Rasmusson, “Neuroethics as a brain-based philosophy of life: The Case of Michael S. Gazzaniga”, *Neuroethics* 2, no. 1 (2009).

¹³ Matt Bai, “The Framing Wars”, *The New York Times*, July 17, 2005. Evan R. Goldstein, “Who Framed George Lakoff?”, *Chronicle of Higher Education* 54, no. 49 (2008). These two articles provide interesting accounts of Lakoff’s role in the Democratic Party and the debate this has led to. The quote comes from Bai. For

Emanuel's critique, see Rahm Emanuel and Bruce Reed, *The Plan: Big Ideas for America* (New York: Public Affairs, 2006), 19-24.

¹⁴ John Gray, *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals* (London: Granta Books, 2002), 19.

¹⁵ Deirdre N. McCloskey, *If You're So Smart: The Narrative of Economic Expertise* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 7.

¹⁶ For critique of this idea, see William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹⁷ They first formulated their theory in *Metaphors We Live By*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) (1st ed. 1980). The fullest statement today is Lakoff/Johnson, *Philosophy*, but see also especially Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal About the Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

¹⁸ Lakoff/Johnson, *Philosophy*, 3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 77.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 59.

²¹ Lakoff/Johnson, *Metaphors*, 4.

²² *Ibid.*, 23.

²³ Lakoff, *Mind*, 22.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 250.

²⁵ Lakoff, *Whose Freedom? The Battle over America's Most Important Idea* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 15f; Pinker/Lakoff, "Frame Politics?", 68.

²⁶ Lakoff, *Mind*, 19. "What I have done is to look behind the veil of conscious thought to see the principles underlying the way both progressives and conservatives really reason, usually unconsciously." (*Ibid.*, 74.) However, he can also say: "The Enlightenment bias is that *we* are rational, that such cognitive biases don't exist in *us* ... and that *we*, as conscious rational beings, have direct access to our thought processes and know our own minds." (*Ibid.*, 229.)

²⁷ Lakoff/Johnson, *Metaphors*, 268.

²⁸ Lakoff/Johnson, *Philosophy*, 528.

²⁹ Pinker, *Thought*, 235-278.

³⁰ George Lakoff, *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 39-140, and Lakoff/Johnson, *Philosophy*, 290-334. See also Mark Johnson, *Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

³¹ Lakoff/Johnson, *Philosophy*, 312; Lakoff, *Politics*, 158.

³² Lakoff, *Politics*, 67.

³³ *Ibid.*, 112.

³⁴ On Kant, see Lakoff/Johnson, *Philosophy*, 415-439.

³⁵ Lakoff, *Freedom*, 70f.

³⁶ Lakoff, *Mind*, 5.

³⁷ Lakoff, *Freedom*, 12.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

³⁹ Cf. Deena Weisberg et al., "The Seductive Allure of Neuroscience Explanations", *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* 20, no. 3 (2008).

⁴⁰ Lakoff, *Freedom*, 203.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 221.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 224. See further 202-225, and Lakoff, *Don't Think of an Elephant: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate: The Essential Guide for Progressives* (White River Junction: Chelsea Green Pub. Co., 2004), 63-67.

⁴³ On the following, see, e.g., Lakoff, *Politics*, 177-196, Lakoff, *Freedom*, 149-169, Lakoff, *Thinking Points: Communicating Our American Values and Vision: A Progressive's Handbook* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 67-81.

⁴⁴ Lakoff, *Politics*, 189.

⁴⁵ Lakoff, *Thinking Points*, 78f.

⁴⁶ Lakoff, *Elephant*, 9. He says that the conservative view is that it is irresponsible for poor parents to have children if they cannot afford pre- or postnatal care if that would be needed. See Lakoff, *Politics*, 266. Discussing Hurricane Katrina, he writes that the radical conservative policy is to "ignore the needs of people impoverished by disaster, who, if they had been disciplined enough, would be okay and who have only themselves to blame if they're not." (Lakoff, *Freedom*, 224.)

⁴⁷ Lakoff, *Politics*, 263-270.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 264.

⁴⁹ He does recognize that, as he puts it, "[t]here are also those who are genuinely pro-life, who believe that life begins with conception" and who therefore also support pre- and postnatal care and general health care

insurance for children. Such peoples are not conservatives, but “pro-life progressives” who often also oppose the death penalty and war. (Lakoff, *Elephant*, 85f.)

⁵⁰ See esp. Lakoff, *Politics*, ch. 14, and Lakoff, *Freedom*, ch. 10.

⁵¹ See his comparison of fundamentalism and conservatism in Lakoff, *Freedom*, 188-191

⁵² “Now, if they obey, they go to heaven ... otherwise they go to hell ... each person is responsible for his or her ultimate salvation. ... those without that discipline will perish.” (*Ibid.*, 183.)

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 177. “Jesus was a progressive, and to follow in his footsteps is to live progressive values. That’s the good news!” (*Ibid.*, 201.) “the Bible ... teaches ... the traditional values of progressive American freedom.” (*Ibid.*, 180.)

⁵⁴ “useful stories and parables for understanding and guiding one’s life” (*Ibid.*, 195.)

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 234.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁵⁷ Christopher Bader et al., “American Piety in the 21st Century: New Insights to the Depth and Complexity of Religion in the Us” (Waco: Baylor Institute for Studies in Religion, Baylor University, 2006).

⁵⁸ The other two were the critical and the distant. Type A and B are the most churchly active groups. “Authoritarian” is, of course, a sociological description. Believers usually don’t use an “authoritarian” image of God as a description of their own understanding of God.

⁵⁹ The studies of Arthur Brooks on charity also seem to disconfirm the thesis of Lakoff. Brooks demonstrates that religiously active people give far more in charity, much more often donate blood, volunteer their time, help homeless people, and so on, than do secular people. They even give more to secular causes and secular organizations than the seculars. This is true both for politically conservative and politically liberal religious people, although the religious conservatives are somewhat more charitable than religious liberals. On the other hand, secular liberals are more charitable than secular conservatives. Brooks actually mentions Lakoff as an example of an expert who adheres to a faulty and stereotypical worldview in which, as he quotes Lakoff saying, “liberals’ conceptual system of the ‘nurturant parent’ has as its highest value helping individuals who need help.” Brooks’ studies not only seem to disconfirm Lakoff’s simple dualistic thesis, it may also indicate that religion, or communal religious activity, is an independent causal factor, something Lakoff hardly allows for. Arthur C. Brooks, *Who Really Cares: The Surprising Truth About Compassionate Conservatism: America’s Charity Divide—Who Gives, Who Doesn’t, and Why It Matters* (New York: Basic Books, 2006). On Lakoff, see p. 17. Similar results are reported in Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 443-492.

⁶⁰ For fascinating accounts of this famous conflict in linguistic theory, see Randy Allen Harris, *The Linguistics Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) and Geoffrey J. Huck and John A. Goldsmith, *Ideology and Linguistic Theory: Noam Chomsky and the Deep Structure Debates* (London: Routledge, 1995). The latter book (pp. 107-119) includes an interview with Lakoff. For a summary of Lakoff’s critique of Chomsky, see Lakoff/Johnson, *Philosophy*, 469-512.

⁶¹ Pinker, *Mind*, 21.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 33.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁶⁵ Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (New York: Viking, 2002), ix.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 3. See also, e.g., Pinker, *The Language Instinct* (New York: W. Morrow and Co., 1994), 405-407, and Pinker, *Mind*, 44-58.

⁶⁷ Pinker/Lakoff, “Frame Politics?”, 66.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁶⁹ It is difficult to understand how the ideas of the “blank slate” and the “noble savage” are compatible.

⁷⁰ Pinker, *Blank Slate*, 295.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 284f.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 285.

⁷³ Mike Hawkins, *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought, 1860-1945: Nature as Model and Nature as Threat* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), Paul Lawrence Farber, *The Temptations of Evolutionary Ethics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), Carl N. Degler, *In Search of Human Nature: The Decline and Revival of Darwinism in American Social Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

⁷⁴ Pinker/Lakoff, “Frame Politics?”, 66.

⁷⁵ Pinker, *Blank Slate*, 141-158.

⁷⁶ For one recent overview, see Jeffrey Schloss, “Introduction: Evolutionary Theories of Religion: Science Unfettered or Naturalism Run Wild?”, in Michael J. Murray and Jeffrey Schloss (eds.), *The Believing Primate:*

Scientific, Philosophical, and Theological Reflections on the Origin of Religion (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1-25. See also Pinker, *Mind*, 554-560.

⁷⁷ Pinker, *Blank Slate*, 55.

⁷⁸ Lakoff, *Mind*, 203. See further 39f, 117f, 201-207. He can describe evolution as “the survival of species that adapt so as to continue successful nurturance.” (Lakoff, *Politics*, 134.) Cf. Frans de Waal’s recent book *The Age of Empathy: Nature’s Lessons for a Kinder Society* (New York: Harmony Books, 2009). He writes that “we are group animals: highly cooperative, sensitive to injustice, sometimes warmongering, but mostly peace loving.” (P. 5.)

⁷⁹ Lakoff, *Mind*, 117.

⁸⁰ Pinker, *Blank Slate*, 258f.

⁸¹ See Jonathan Haidt and Jesse Graham, “When Morality Opposes Justice: Conservatives Have Moral Intuitions That Liberals May Not Recognize”, *Social Justice Research* 20, no. 1 (2007).

⁸² Pinker, *Blank Slate*, ch. 15. For a more recent overview of his views, see Pinker, “The Moral Instinct”, *The New York Times*, Jan. 13, 2008.

⁸³ Pinker, *Blank Slate*, 274f.

⁸⁴ Jonathan Haidt has often discussed the “ingroup-outgroup”-attitudes that, according to him, characterize a large part of, e.g., psychological research. “Social justice researchers might therefore benefit from stepping out of the ‘good versus evil’ mindset that is often present in our conferences, our academic publications, and our private conversations. One psychological universal (part of the ingroup foundation) is that when you call someone evil you erect a protective moral wall between yourself and the other, and this wall prevents you from seeing or respecting the other’s point of view.” (Haidt/Graham, 114.)

⁸⁵ Pinker, *Blank Slate*, 233-239, Pinker/Lakoff, “Frame Politics?”, 61-63.

⁸⁶ Lakoff/Johnson, *Philosophy*, 533. See further 513-538 and Lakoff, *Mind*, 205-229.

⁸⁷ Lakoff/Johnson, *Philosophy*, 536. Discussing the rational actor model, the psychologist Drew Westen says: “The only people who think like this on important issues—whether choosing a spouse or a president—have serious brain damage or psychopathology.” (*The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation* [New York: Public Affairs, 2007], 31.)

⁸⁸ For interesting discussions of recent experimental studies, see Anthony Appiah, *Experiments in Ethics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), and Leslie Paul Thiele, *The Heart of Judgment: Practical Wisdom, Neuroscience, and Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁸⁹ See Johnson, *Moral Imagination*.

⁹⁰ On politics, see Pinker, *Blank Slate*, ch. 16.

⁹¹ Here he builds on the conservative thinker Thomas Sowell’s book *A Conflict of Visions: Ideological Origins of Political Struggles* (New York: Quill, 1987).

⁹² Lakoff, *Freedom*, 144.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 155f.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 160, Lakoff, *Mind*, 57-58.

⁹⁵ Pinker, *Blank Slate*, 297.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 296-299.

⁹⁷ Christian Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 82-85. He also mentions a third tradition, the “Community Lost” narrative, that was influential in sociology up to the 1970s, but which now has lost much of its influence.

⁹⁸ Steven Pinker, “Steven Pinker on Francis Collins”, <http://whyevolutionistrue.wordpress.com/2009/07/11/steven-pinker-on-francis-collins/>.

⁹⁹ Francis S. Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

¹⁰⁰ Pinker, “Francis Collins”.

¹⁰¹ Steven Pinker, “The Stupidity of Dignity”, *The New Republic* 239, no. 9 (2008). Pinker thinks that the idea of “human dignity” is useless, while Lakoff describes it as a central progressive principle (Lakoff, *Freedom*, 147).

¹⁰² “Anyone familiar with academia knows that it breeds ideological cults that are prone to dogma and resistant to criticism.” (Pinker, *Blank Slate*, 341.)

¹⁰³ E.g., Pinker, *Mind*, 554-560. The citation is from p. 557.

¹⁰⁴ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 590.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. following words of another prominent secular thinker, Jürgen Habermas, who writes: “Christianity has functioned for the normative self-understanding of modernity as more than a mere precursor or a catalyst. Egalitarian universalism, from which sprang the ideas of freedom and social solidarity, of an autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, of the individual morality of conscience, human rights, and democracy, is the direct heir to the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love. This legacy, substantially unchanged, has

been the object of continual critical appropriation and reinterpretation. To this day, there is no alternative to it. And in light of the current challenges of a postnational constellation, we continue to draw on the substance of this heritage. Everything else is just idle postmodern talk.” *Time of Transitions* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), 150f.

¹⁰⁶ See e.g. Steven Shapin, *The Scientific Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

¹⁰⁷ C. John Sommerville, *The Decline of the Secular University* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 15.

¹⁰⁸ Lakoff/Johnson, *Philosophy*, 89.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 88-92.

¹¹⁰ McCloskey, 6.

¹¹¹ See Thiele, 67-69. More knowledge also increases the ability to rationalize. See Westen, 100.

¹¹² Lakoff, *Mind*, 227f. He builds on Daniel Kahneman and Jonathan Renshon, “Why Hawks Win”, *Foreign Policy* 158 (2007).

¹¹³ My initial interest in cognitive science was constructive, not critical. I was interested in investigating what cognitive science and neuroscience could contribute to our understanding of ethical rationality.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 165f.

¹¹⁵ Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), xii.

¹¹⁶ In addition to the already mentioned works by Smith and Nelson, see John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006).

¹¹⁷ Nelson, *Economics*, 106.

¹¹⁸ Conor Cunningham, *Darwin’s Pious Idea: Why the Ultra-Darwinists and Creationists Both Get It Wrong* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 300. On this, see also Mary Midgley, *The Myths We Live By* (London: Routledge, 2003).

¹¹⁹ I am grateful to Roland Spjuth, Pekka Mellergård, Mats Wahlberg, and two anonymous reviewers for their comments on earlier drafts of this article, and to Janet French, Ross Wagner, and Karin Eriksson for correcting my English.