

## **Framing Reality Language and the Mind**

By  
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In one of the early democratic primary debates this election season, candidate Clinton interrupted her opponents to ask for a “reality check.” That’s kind of what I’m doing here today, interrupting our conversation, that is, the way we frame things in our minds, in order to look at things as they really are. Clinton has also often argued that this election isn’t just about words and nice speeches, which is also my argument today, that reality is more than our descriptions of and explanations about it. As a disclaimer, however, please note that my philosophical agreement with Clinton on these points is in no way an endorsement or rejection of her candidacy. I’m just using her remarks as a springboard into my subject, *Framing Reality and the Language of the Mind*. For in actuality, after all, with all the hoopla over Reverend Jeremiah Wright’s sermons, Barak Obama’s paraphrased use of his friend’s speeches, his recent use of the word “bitter” to describe bitter people, and the ludicrous suggestion that in saying, “anyone would be better than Bush,” he is somehow endorsing his Republican opponent, John McCain, I’d say this election has digressed to be about nothing but words.

But I digress myself. Today’s message is about the power of words versus the power of reality; it’s about worldview versus the real world. It would be a better world if, as Clinton put it, we could all stop all our chatter and take a “reality check” now and again. But I’m afraid reality is usually no match for the awesome power of words. The world is no match for worldview. Whoever said, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me,” needs a reality check. Words can be very hurtful, not only for the individuals they might offend, insult, and degrade, but for the whole world which is being treated as the proverbial square peg being forced into a round hole—reality being made to fit into our erroneous ideas about reality.

In his book, *Moral Politics*, cognitive linguist, George Lakoff, an expert on how the human mind works to frame its worldview, says, “We think and talk at too fast a rate and at too deep a level to have conscious awareness and control over everything we think and say.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, we’re often unconscious about the way we use our words, which is the reason words can be so misleading, whether intentionally or not. Words, as Lakoff explains, are used to “frame” reality. They are the apparatus upon which we hang reality, at least in our minds. “Framing is about getting language that fits your worldview,” Lakoff explains, “It’s not just language. The ideas are primary—and the language carries those ideas, evokes those ideas.”<sup>2</sup> The bottom line is that we often use

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<sup>1</sup> Lakoff, George, *Moral Politics*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 1996, 2002, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Lakoff, George, *Don’t Think of an Elephant*, Chelsea Green Publishing, White River Junction, Vermont, 2004, p. 4.

words and choose words to consciously or unconsciously draw others into our own worldview.

As an example of how this works; just last week, after I spoke on fundamentalism at a church near Cincinnati, someone asked me why I refer to them as “fundamentalists” when they’ve said they would prefer to be called “evangelicals.” I explained that the term “evangelicals” did not come into vogue until after the horrific destruction of the World Trade Center when Rupert Murdoch, the owner of Fox News, instructed his employees not to refer to Christians as fundamentalists anymore because we wouldn’t want to liken them to Muslim fundamentalists. In the battle for ratings, the other news networks and agencies soon followed suit, and, almost overnight, without even realizing it, we all changed our language and started calling those we had formerly referred to as fundamentalists, “evangelicals.” And, like the Cincinnati woman who asked me the question, we think we’ve made this change because it’s the right thing to do, not because Rupert Murdoch has successfully used it to draw us into his worldview.

But why do we do this to begin with? Why are we reluctant to cope with reality on its own terms? And why are we so compelled to want others to agree with us and to see things the way we do? Like most complex issues, there is probably more than one answer to these kinds of questions. But it probably can be narrowed down to our primal need for control. The world as it is—reality, as it is—seem extremely threatening to us because it is so ill-defined. At the very least, all of us require the fulfillment of our basic physiological needs—food, shelter, and security—if we are going to survive. But the archetypal fear of our ancestors still in our souls is uncertain of what the future might bring. Perhaps there will not be enough rain. Or it may rain too much and flood our fields. Perhaps our hunt will prove unsuccessful, or raiders from another tribe might attack us. Today we similarly fear the disastrous effects of global climate change, increasing food shortages around the world, and that we might be attacked by terrorists.

So, regardless of the truth, regardless of reality as it is, we choose to frame things in a way that is comforting and reassures us in the wake of such uncertainty and chaos. Words bring order to world, and if we can convince everyone to read from the same page, we don’t have to face our fears—we don’t have to cope with the real dangers that are before us. In 1992, during his run against Bill Clinton for the U.S. Presidency, George Bush Sr., mocked Al Gore as “ozone man,” and warned that, “This guy is so far out in the environmental extreme we’ll be up to our necks in owls and out of work for every American.” A few years later, when Gore was himself running for President against George Junior, he had to squelch his concern for the environment so as not to be seen as an environmental extremist in a country that continued to ignore what censored scientists have been struggling to warn us about since the 1950’s. Until just a few years ago, the entire Bush administration, and conservative propagandists like Tucker Carlson and Sean Hannity continued to deny the reality of global warming by framing the argument in a way that made it seem as if there was some debate among scientists over the issue. The factual reality, however, is that scientists have been almost completely unanimous about global warming and its cause for more than a generation, and, in fact, discovered the greenhouse effect in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Now, after the success of films like Gore’s *An*

*Inconvenient Truth*, years of droughts, rising sea levels, melting glaciers, and unprecedented heat-waves around the world, they are no longer capable of such denial. Yet, in order to maintain the status quo so that we don't have to actually change our collective habits, these same parties, that once completely denied global warming, are again reframing the issue to suggest that scientist are in disagreement as to what's causing it. "It's part of a natural cycle," they're saying, implying that it isn't being caused by humans, so why should we change our ways?

They're afraid of change because change leads to uncertainty and chaos. If we've followed the same course for a hundred years and calamity hasn't befallen us, we should follow it for another hundred years. "This, they say, "is the way we've always done it!" To control the worldview of others, of how they collectively look at things, is to control the world order. The reason we want to dominate the minds of others is rooted in the typical dominator story from the ancient Babylonian myth of Marduk who slays the chaos goddess Tiamat, then recreates the world by reorganizing her corpse; to stories like *Jaws* in which good Chief Brody restores order by slaying the beast from the depths; or Darth Vader who works to bring order to the Republic; or Maxwell Smart who works for a secret government agency called CONTROL to thwart the evil plans of another secret organization called KAOS. That's what words are; our attempt to control chaos by helping us imagine that by explaining reality we somehow control it.

As such, words alter our sense of reality and lead to what Freud called the "omnipotence of thought," referring to an immature, if not neurotic, approach to the world in which we think we can magically make the world whatever we want it to be simply by framing it the right way; as if our words are magic incantations, "mistaking," as E.B. Tylor put it, "an ideal connection for a real one."<sup>3</sup> In this way, our words, which help us frame our concepts of reality, do quite the opposite of what they are meant to do by actually making us less aware of the world around us. As Freud, who said, "Neurotics live in a special world in which... only the 'neurotic standard of currency' counts..." further explained, "Thus the omnipotence of thought, the over-estimation of psychic processes as opposed to reality, proves to be of unlimited effect in the neurotic's affective life and in all that emanates from it."<sup>4</sup> In short, our behavior is based on our opinions about the world, rather than on the world itself. Words allow us to replace natural constructs with psychological constructs. Again, as Freud put it, "Objects as such are over-shadowed by the ideas representing them."<sup>5</sup>

In his, *Totem and Taboo*, Freud suggested a three-tiered evolution of mental development. The first and most immature stage, what he called the *animistic* stage, is marked by one's own sense of self-importance and omnipotence, in which one has the power to control the unpredictable forces of nature oneself. This is succeeded by what he called the *religious* stage, at which point one tries to control the chaos (a.k.a., the forces

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<sup>3</sup> Freud, Sigmund, *Totem and Taboo*, Barnes and Noble, New York, NY, 1913, 2005, p. 76.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 84.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 82.

of nature) by appealing to an omnipotent higher power, or God. The third stage is what he called the *scientific* stage, during which, in his words, one “has acknowledged his smallness and has submitted to death as to all other natural necessities in a spirit of resignation.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, the more highly developed our minds are, the less sure we are about the world. The more in touch with reality we are, the less secure we feel. As San Juan de la Cruz put it, “The higher he climbs, the less he understands.” I have to admit, awareness in this light doesn’t sound very enticing, which is why so many people would prefer to remain ignorant rather than face all the inconvenient truths in life. We would rather remain the innocent Persephone, lulled drowsy by the narcissi filled meadows of life, than dragged into Hades to have our innocence replaced with a darker eye. We would prefer to remain in Plato’s cave of shadows, in the state of dogmatic slumber, rather than emerge into the blinding world of light.

And since we are talking about the importance of words, we should not overlook the fact that Freud used the word “science” to define his highest stage of cognitive development. *Science* comes from the Latin word meaning “knowledge,” and is etymologically related to the word *senses*. Science is the particular knowledge derived from the senses, rather than from mere thoughts. Science is an attempt to grasp the world on its own terms, by using our senses to grapple with what is actually before us, rather than forcing what is before us into the small box that is our mind. It is far from perfect, and our senses themselves are misleading and limited in their scope, but the knowledge derived from them is, at least, more reliable than that based merely on our unconscious wishes and desires, because it copes with what is actually before us, with what actually has some substance and existence in time and space.

Since we’re talking about worldview, let’s take, for example, our view of the world as compared to our thoughts about the world. When I use the word “America,” for instance, it may conjure an image of a map of the United States sandwiched between Canada and Mexico. If you’re in Canada or Latin America, however, this limited definition of America might be offensive, since the people on both sides of the U.S. border also consider themselves Americans (even if those in the middle don’t). At least when dealing with folks from Canada and South America, we need to choose our words more carefully so as not to offend them. But, even more importantly, if we set aside our conceptual atlas and look at our planet purely with our senses as it actually appears, we realize there is no such place as America, or the United States, or Canada or Mexico, for that matter. There is only a blue sphere outlined by the blackness of space, containing seven landmasses, loosely defined by the surrounding oceans. In reality, we live in a world without borders, save a few natural barriers like oceans, rivers and mountain ranges. Yet, in our attempt to control reality, we live as if our mind constructs are real; making maps with defined borders, requiring people to declare residency in order to do things like vote, or to have the proper documentation to cross certain borders to live and work, even though they don’t exist anywhere but in our minds. Race, for that matter, is also an illusion of the mind. Genetically speaking, there is only one human race, not a black, white, red, or yellow race. In the same way, money is but a concept we have all

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 85f.

agreed upon, thought it has little to no basis in reality. This is especially so now that the U.S. dollar is no longer linked to the gold standard. It has value only because we have all collectively agreed to project value onto it. Money is an idea, not a reality. Race is an idea, not a reality. American is an idea, not a reality.

Of course there is the notion, as in the story of the *Velveteen Rabbit*, that if we love something enough it becomes real. Perhaps this is true. Perhaps this is why the Marduks and Murdochs or the world want us all to love our country and love capitalism, because if we love them enough they will become real, and, it seems, have become real. But the higher part of consciousness, the part of us that if more highly evolved, realizes that our ideas about the world are not the same as the world, and that, especially when it comes to big things, it becomes necessary for us to quiet our minds and contemplate the world as it really is. Our thoughts distract us from the big picture, from seeing the whole truth, from viewing the world as one world. This is why the *Kabbalah* tells us “definition is spiritual idolatry,” and why the *Tao te Ching* say, “The name that can be named is not the eternal Name.” The highest ecstasy of the mystical state is “unification,” the experience of being one with all that is, and mysticism is the state of not knowing, of being in the mist, the cloud of unknowing, letting go of our ideas about the world so we can experience the world as it truly is, a great singularity, a divine unity. So, regardless of who I end up voting for this election, I find myself agreeing with Hilary Clinton on this point, that we should stop talking and take time out for a reality check.