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Framing the Unframed

There are two common mistakes people make when thinking about framing.

The first mistake is believing that framing is a matter of coming up with clever slogans, like “death tax” or “partial-birth abortion,” that resonate with a significant segment of the population. Those slogans only work when there has been a long—often decades-long—campaign of framing issues like taxation and abortion conceptually, so that the brains of many people are prepared to accept those phrases. I was once asked if I could reframe—that is, provide a winning slogan for—a global warming bill “by next Tuesday.” I laughed. Effective reframing is the changing of millions of brains to be prepared to recognize a reality. That preparation hadn’t been done.

The second mistake is believing that, if only we could present the facts about a certain reality in some effective way, then people would “wake up“ to that reality, change their personal opinion, and start acting politically to change society. “Why can’t people wake up?” is the complaint—as if people are “asleep” and just have to be aroused to see and comprehend the world around them. But the reality is that certain ideas have to be ingrained in us—developed over time consistently and precisely enough to create an accurate frame for our understanding.

Here is an example. Pensions, even by those who advocate for them, are often framed as benefits—“extras” granted by an employer to the employed. Yet what is a pension, really? A pension is delayed payment for work already done. As a condition for taking a job, a pension is part of your earned salary, withheld and invested by your employer, to be paid later, after retirement. So if an employer says, “we just don’t have the money to pay for your pension,” that means that he has either embezzled, stolen, or misspent your earnings, which by contract he is responsible for paying you. Your employer is a thief.