

At this point we have to ask The Reflexivity Question for Personhood: Can linguistic framing change the kind of person someone is? The answer seems to be yes, though possibly not in extreme cases. And of course it may depend on age and circumstances. But such changes do appear to have happened over the years—so far as I can tell, mostly with biconceptuals. Extreme conservatives (estimated at about 25 to 30 percent of the US population), it appears, cannot be changed by reframing and setting up an effective communication system that operates full time, not just at elections. Yes, this means that some people cannot be “reached” (an inaccurate progressive metaphor) or “woken up” (another inaccurate progressive metaphor).

Consider a moderate progressive who is partly conservative. She hears conservative language and conservative arguments over and over, day after day for years—in the media or with friends or both. The conservative language will activate the conservative moral system, making it a bit stronger every time the language is heard. As the conservative circuitry in her brain becomes stronger (the synapses strengthen), the more likely it is that her views on issues will change from progressive to conservative. The result may be a shift within the brain from a person who is partly conservative to a person who is mostly conservative. I believe that this has actually happened in many cases.

That is the power of the conservative messaging system: It is reflexivity in action. Over time, someone’s very personhood can change, and with it her ideal of what other people should be. And, of course, who they should vote for.

The other conservative use of reflexivity depends upon getting those votes. Once in office, conservatives can not only say that government cannot work and has to be minimized and privatized, but by being in the government, they can also stop it from working, thus creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. How? By cutting taxes, by cutting funding, by passing laws, and, in the Supreme Court, by reinterpreting laws.

In contemporary America, politics and personhood are inseparable—and apparently moving in a conservative direction. To change that direction, progressives need to understand the role of the brain and of communication