The Sacredness of Life and Liberty
by George Lakoff & Elisabeth Wehling

The New York Times, on June 5, 2012, reported that so-called "morning-after pills" work by preventing women's eggs from being fertilized, and not by preventing fertilized eggs from being implanted in the womb. The latest scientific findings show that "the pills delay ovulation, the release of eggs from ovaries that occurs before eggs are fertilized, and some pills also thicken cervical mucus so sperm have trouble swimming."

In short, morning-after pills do not operate on fertilized eggs at all. Why should this matter? Because many conservative Republicans, as well as the official Catholic Church, believe the metaphor that Fertilized Eggs Are People, and that preventing such egg-people from being implanted in the womb constitutes "abortion," and hence, in their view, baby-killing. The Times article correctly reports that "it turns out that the politically charged debate over morning-after pills and abortion, a divisive issue in this election year, is probably rooted in outdated or incorrect scientific guesses about how the pills work."

That's the truth. Does the truth matter?

It has now been six weeks since that report was made public. But there has been no call from conservative Republicans and the Catholic Church supporting the use of "morning-after pills" to prevent the murder of babies on the grounds that you can't murder babies who don't exist.

The point is clear. The truth doesn't matter.

The point was made over a decade ago in my (George Lakoff's) book Moral Politics, which observed that conservatives against abortion were not in favor of guaranteed prenatal or postnatal care for mothers and children. Such care is crucial in determining the health and survivability of the babies. In short, conservatives against such policies do not care about the well-being of the babies at all.

The issue really has been control -- who controls reproduction, men or women? Hence, the prevalence of parental and spousal notification laws governing abortions. The abortion issue is really about male control in family life -- and in society in general. It also involves the notion that women who engage in immoral behavior, such as sex with partners they do not seek to have children with, ought to bear the consequences of their actions as a "just punishment." To establish that control, both conservative Republicans and the Catholic Church propose taking a metaphor literally, that A Fertilized Egg Is A Person. Taking the metaphor literally allows for the claim that preventing abortions constitutes saving lives.
That this is a metaphor is clear. Imagine that you want to buy a horse. You pay for a horse, and what is delivered to you is a fertilized horse egg. You would probably feel cheated. You can't ride or race a fertilized horse egg. It isn't a horse. Even in Texas. You need a mare and a lot of development. A single cell isn't a horse, a cluster of undifferentiated cells (technically, a "blastocyst") isn't a horse, a cluster of differentiated cells isn't a horse, a horse embryo isn't a horse, and a horse fetus isn't a horse. You would feel cheated if you were sold any of them.

Why mention Texas? Because the Republican Party of Texas recently came out with its 2012 platform. The party proposes a ban on all means to prevent the development of a person, from single-cell to cell cluster, from cell cluster to embryo, from embryo to fetus, from fetus to person. It bans the prevention of development, whether abortion or the morning-after pill, calling for a Human Life Amendment to the Constitution and protection of cells and cell clusters under the Fourteenth Amendment. This means no freedom for families, couples, and rape victims to decide whether or not they need to allow the development of fertilized cells -- or even the fertilization of unfertilized cells. They want to enshrine in the Constitution the metaphor that Cells Are People, in this case, Americans, which they see as protecting human life, and American life.

There is much that is wrong with this. First, cells and cell clusters (or "blastocysts") are not people.

Second, the GOP's policy does not protect American life at all. For example, arguing that this bill guarantees that "all innocent human life must be respected and safeguarded from fertilization to natural death" is nonsense. Real safeguarding of human life would involve measures that the Republican-dominated Texas legislature opposes: universal health care, a renewal of the Violence Against Women Act, protection against starvation, and a ban on poisonous food and environmental pollution in the name of corporate profit.

Specifically, it does not mean improved pre- and postnatal care, which could in fact save children's lives. The U.S. has a skyrocketing infant mortality rate, to great part due to lacking pre- and postnatal care. According to the 2011 United Nations World Population Prospects report, we rank number 34 in infant mortality. As a comparison, Japan (rank 3 on the list) has less than half as many infant deaths. By next year, the U.S. is expected to be 49 (according to the CIA World Factbook). When couples want to have a child, the issue of development becomes paramount. Fertilization is not automatic. Sometimes artificial insemination techniques are needed. Even in normal cases, development is, or should be, monitored closely, with regular tests. Would-be mothers need to be very careful, since what happens in prenatal development matters. No alcohol. No drugs. Watch out for poisons like
pesticides in foods. Eat carefully. Each stage of development is crucial. A child is not automatic. A child is a lot more than an egg, a blastocyst, an embryo, or a fetus. Development takes intention, effort, physical protection, and good health care.

The Texas GOP evokes the Cells Are Americans metaphor by referring to cells as **unborn children**. Based on this metaphor, human attributes are mapped onto cell clusters: people have feelings, people have constitutional rights, people can be crime victims, people can experience physical pain, and so on. The Texas GOP then extends the metaphor to constitutional rights, requesting **"total Constitutional rights for the unborn child."** It extends it to victimhood in urging the State to "consider the unborn child as an equal victim in any crime, including domestic violence." This means that a young woman who is raped by her father or uncle will be kept from stopping cell development in her body. The same Crime Victim Frame is used by the Texas GOP to prevent surrogate pregnancies, calling the commonplace practice "human embryo trafficking" and asking for a ban on it.

The notion of a crime victim, of course, implies the ability to experience mental or physical pain, afflicted by a villain. The GOP introduces this notion by supporting legislation that requires doctors to "provide pain relief" for cells and cell clusters during abortion.

Here's what progressives need to do: Never use the Cells Are People metaphor, even in arguing against conservative policy. Never use the term **baby** or **unborn child** to refer to a **blastocyst, embryo, or fetus**.

Stop using the term **abortion**. It has misleading properties. When we speak of "aborting a mission," the mission was intentional and planned, and the original idea was to bring it to an end state. What happens with an unwelcome pregnancy is nothing like this. The pregnancy was not intentional, not planned, and there was never any intention of bringing it to an end state. Rather, what is desired is **development prevention**, keeping any development from happening. That development can be prevented at many stages, from unfertilized cells (via morning-after pills), to blastocyst to embryo, from embryo to fetus, from fetus to a non-fully-formed-human, to an unviable human (one that can't live outside the womb). The earlier the development prevention, the better for the woman.

Never use the expression **partial birth abortion**. It's a conservative political tool, not a medical reality. Here's the Texas GOP in its 2012 platform: "We oppose partial birth abortion." The term was invented by a hired, conservative language professional. The image is grisly, and that was the point. But no such thing exists. The medical condition it is supposed to represent is one where a potential child cannot survive, either because it has no brain, or because of some other equally awful condition. And usually, the mother's life is at risk. This has nothing to do with either giving birth or with more common reasons for **preventing development**.
Whenever possible, avoid the term **morning-after pill**. It evokes a prototypical frame of immoral behavior, bad decision-making, the inability to "just say no" at a party or during a date. It excludes the fact that the treatment can help rape victims prevent development, be used in cases where other birth control methods failed, and so on.

Never evoke the Consumer Frame. It has been introduced to the debate by the term **Pro-Choice**, and is now used everywhere. For example, in the GOP’s 2012 platform, where a decision for development prevention is labeled as a woman **ordering** an abortion, as if she were shopping. The frame hides the fact that such decisions are never made easily and are commonly made by men and women, and often their families, together.

The reason not to use the above language is that it can both hide reality and does not adequately communicate the moral values that underlie progressive policy. The right to limit development is a matter of liberty and family freedom.

First of all, all of the issues above concern men as well as women. Remember, 100 percent of all pregnancies are caused by men, and a child implies lifelong involvement for the man as well as the woman.

Describing pregnancies and development prevention as women’s issues hides that fact. Additionally, in violence against women such as rape, the man is the issue. We need to get over the idea that these are women’s issues.

For many women the issue of preventing a pregnancy is a matter of liberty, of the freedom to live your life as you want. You can think of it as a **pro-liberty** issue. It is also a matter of having the family that makes sense to you, and so it is a **pro-family** issue, a matter of **Family Freedom**, the freedom to plan your own family. Women seeking freedom have always, and will always, seek to control development of life within their bodies. Where there have been laws against this, there have always been back-alley abortions, which are dangerous and have led to the maiming and death of women.

Furthermore, protecting human life is a real issue in the United States. Protecting human life is one of the moral mandates of government. The lives and health of infants, children, and mothers -- as well as all other Americans -- should be protected through accessible and improved health care, pre- and postnatal care, a ban on poisonous food and environmental pollution, a renewal of the Violence Against Women Act, and so on. Even in Texas.