

# Forbes

## How Gay Marriage Is Like Lisp

By: Timothy B. Lee – March 26, 2013

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Paul Graham once wrote an essay about the power of programming languages. Programming languages vary in abstraction, with the most abstract languages generally allowing programmers to express more complex concepts succinctly. One of Graham's arguments was that programmers have an asymmetrical view of programming language power. He made the point by talking about an imaginary programming language called "Blub":

As long as our hypothetical Blub programmer is looking down the power continuum, he knows he's looking down. Languages less powerful than Blub are obviously less powerful, because they're missing some feature he's used to. But when our hypothetical Blub programmer looks in the other direction, up the power continuum, he doesn't realize he's looking up. What he sees are merely weird languages. He probably considers them about equivalent in power to Blub, but with all this other hairy stuff thrown in as well. Blub is good enough for him, because he thinks in Blub.

When we switch to the point of view of a programmer using any of the languages higher up the power continuum, however, we find that he in turn looks down upon Blub. How can you get anything done in Blub? It doesn't even have y.

I think a similar observation applies to moral progress. Human beings are naturally deeply prejudiced. Primitive societies are almost invariably racist, sexist, and homophobic. Yet over time, certain societies have learned to become more egalitarian.

When someone in one society looks at another society that's less morally advanced, its lack of moral advancement is obvious. For example, everyone in modern American society can see that Egypt's rape culture makes Egypt a more backwards and oppressive place than the United States. The view of Egyptian conservatives that "a girl contributes 100 percent to her own raping" when she goes out in public without a male escort sounds absurd to Americans across the political spectrum. Indeed, conservatives are likely to be even more vocal than liberals about the subject, citing America's relative feminism as a sign that American culture is morally superior to the more conservative cultures of the Muslim world.

On the other hand, when an American conservative in Texas looks at states and countries that have more egalitarian norms than Texas does—nations that recognize gay marriage, for example, or states that are relatively friendly to undocumented immigrants, they don't see a society with greater moral sophistication. Nor do they necessarily think those societies are morally backwards. They just think they're *weird*. The whole idea of gay marriage seems baffling, in much the same way that Lisp Macros seems baffling to a Blub programmer.

In both cases, abstract arguments tend not to be very effective. Sure, a Lisp programmer can tell a C programmer how great macros are, just as liberals can try to explain to conservatives why denying marriage equality is unfair to gay people. But there's no substitute for first-hand experience—for actually using Lisp macros and having gay friends—to persuade people that the alternative is barbaric.