



## Considering Collective Moral Injury following the 2016 Election

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## CONSIDERING COLLECTIVE MORAL INJURY FOLLOWING THE 2016 ELECTION

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*Abstract.* The results of the 2016 U.S. presidential election came as a shock to many people, seemingly an impossible outcome. Rather than furthering the advancement of a progressive, inclusive society, the election of Donald Trump promised to further a reactionary agenda, with promises to undo what many considered long-delayed positive changes toward a kinder, more compassionate society. In addition to precipitating disbelief and terror, the election outcome and subsequent events are arguably experienced as moral injuries. In this article, the construct of moral injury is discussed alongside familiar conceptions of trauma, in an effort to enhance our understanding of how social and political changes affect people.

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*Keywords:* moral injury, PTSD, Trump, trauma, betrayal, leadership

When social trust is destroyed, it is replaced with the settled expectancy of harm, exploitation, and humiliation from others. (Shay, 2014)

### What is “Moral Injury?”

Perpetrating, failing to prevent, bearing witness to, or learning about acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations. (Litz et al., 2009)

[A] disruption in an individual’s sense of personal morality and capacity to behave in a just manner. (Drescher et al., 2011)

“Moral injury” (Shay, 2014) is a term used by psychiatrist Jonathan Shay to describe how warriors faced with committing or witnessing morally problematic acts in the course of duty suffer harm related to conflict with their values. This may happen because of orders from above, as a matter of personal decision, or both. In this article, I review the concept of moral injury and discuss “collective moral injury”—a speculation about the effect of ongoing, unrelenting moral injury on the body politic. Different people are injured by different things, but we share the common capacity for injury in the face of moral transgression.

As with PTSD, moral injury was first used to describe harm caused to combat veterans in conducting the business of war. Because moral injury is not presented as a clinical construct, it is not appropriate to discuss “treatment” of moral injury, although treatment approaches to PTSD provide a partial roadmap for developing ways to relieve moral injury. This makes sense, because—regardless of whether one is discussing clinical treatment or nonclinical efforts to foster recovery from moral injury—PTSD and moral injury tend to cooccur and overlap, and are often best addressed together. Physicians, psychotherapists, human rights workers, humanitarian workers, first responders, therapists, survivors (of abuse, political violence, torture, forced migration, for example) and so on—are regularly confronted with terrible moral dilemmas in addition to direct and indirect stress. Moral injury is a useful concept in the practice of psychotherapy and fruitfully recontextualizes many aspects of the work. A full discussion of this is not within the scope of this article, but is interesting to contemplate.

### Everyday Moral Injury

Although less dramatic than war atrocities, we confront ordinary moral and ethical dilemmas every day—these can sometimes be shocking whereas at other times (similar to cumulative trauma; Khan, 1963) the insults are smaller but can build up to a tipping point. Some examples of this might be walking past a homeless person and wanting to help but deciding not to, or having a friend whose child is having problems that you might help with, but don't.

Avoidance is adaptive in the short term, particularly when there is nothing we can do—or at least we think there is nothing we can do—to influence the situation. Over time, however, avoidance can lead to chronic emotional numbing, decreasing empathy, and an inability to be

open with others. Moral numbing from chronic exposure to moral transgression can lead to a state of dehumanization, which perpetuates a systemic tendency to continue the avoidance and dissociate awareness of the impact of one's action or inaction. Moral numbing might seem a self-protective response, but can lead to burnout and other problems, because disillusionment and loss of efficacy erode a sense of meaning and purpose.

Exposure to stress is also thought to lead to *posttraumatic growth* (PTG) (Westphal & Bonanno, 2007). Posttraumatic growth describes a situation in which one's response to distress may lead to personal development beyond the pretraumatic state, rather than simply a recovery to baseline (inherent in the construct of resilience). Patients with moderate, but not severe, PTSD have been seen in research to show the greatest PTG, suggesting that although PTSD is a prerequisite for PTG, more severe symptoms may interfere with processing trauma most effectively (Schubert, Schmidt, & Rosner, 2016). Moral strain may provoke positive reactions, leading to greater motivation to seek change as well as moral, spiritual, and emotional development. This appears to be more likely if one experiences guilt, rather than shame, as guilt tends to motivate restitutive action. Yet, more severe moral injury consequences may get in the way of recovery and development. For instance, shame often produces more shame, and ensuing self-condemnation, leading to social withdrawal. The lack of social support further precludes access to the potentially reparative effect of social interaction.

### Collective Moral Injury is the Norm

What happens when shared moral dilemmas confront us on a daily basis, and it is not possible to get used to or ignore them completely? At our peril, we either may become inured—morally numb—or we may find ourselves in a state of sustained moral outrage, often compounded by feelings of powerlessness and an inability to achieve desired outcomes within an appropriate time frame. Under the conditions of today's volatile political climate, it is easy to be destabilized by both the whiplash roller-coaster ride of the daily news cycle as well as by the constant stream of atrocious ideas and behaviors on many fronts (particularly the confusing and often contradictory messages from our current administration and president). It is a game changer to have these ideas and actions gushing from positions of such vast and unimaginable influence and power.

### Extinction Level Threat

Even if the stresses and dilemmas aren't explicit, they are still *in the air all the time*, unspoken, a hairsbreadth away from awareness. In addition to stress caused by threat, the state of the world is a constant moral strain. It is visible in protests rife with moral outrage, glaring injustice, racist and fascist fervor, general divisiveness, and the distortion of fact for fiction that only serves to increase uncertainty and undermine trust and safety.

There are, of course, constant struggles taking place around the globe. As you read this, people are committing genocide, refugees suffer in numbers previously unheard of, consequences of lost health-care coverage loom, glaring social and economic inequality lead not just to disparities in opportunity but ruined lives and violence. Big problems are ignored, corporate greed and favoritism trump fairness, constant disasters and terrorism take place, climate change escalates, and there is a general decay of basic human decency. Large groups of people bear little empathy toward one another, and communication regarding the most pressing issues is rarely effective. Although violence and other sources of human suffering (e.g., illness) have been gradually declining over the centuries (Pinker, 2011), we now possess weapons of violence and technology of great and unpredictable potency, which threaten the survival of our species as well as the stability of the entire ecosystem. Living with these realities itself is a constant moral affront for many, as well as a source of traumatic stress.

Betrayal by leaders is a feature of moral injury highlighted by Shay (2014), a situation many of us feel we are currently experiencing. Are our leaders failing to maintain a society that provides structure, safety, and trust? Is there an indication that our leaders are dropping the ball, or even allowing and encouraging the betrayal of basic rights? Is this a violation of a solemn promise, a social compact between government and the people? Are we betraying ourselves and one another in our day-to-day decisions, even if there is nothing to be reliably done to right the wrong? Are we each personally, fully, responsible for the state of the world?

In America, for years now, there has been partisan fighting and nepotistic agendas crippling our representative political system. Our system, meant to limit the damage done by incompetent or malicious leaders, is being tested from within by the questionable leadership of this new

administration and infighting both within and between political parties. Our system is being tested from outside by the specter of interfering foreign governments, most notably from alleged election manipulation by, and disturbing ties with, Russia. The global coalition of nations and interests we have been able to assemble thus far is fragmented and unfocused, sometimes effective but often highly inefficient. At every level, chaos threatens complexity; singularity threatens multiplicity.

### **How has Conceptualizing PTSD Paved the Way for Social Change?**

Of course, it is easy to see how all of these factors are collectively traumatizing. Over the past four decades, our culture has become intimately familiar with trauma. As with moral injury, posttraumatic stress disorder was first recognized—out of necessity—following the Vietnam War, but not until much preventable harm (a moral transgression) had been perpetrated. Before PTSD was introduced as a diagnostic category in 1973, negative effects of combat were poorly understood and often interpreted as being a form of weakness, stigma, and shame. Aside from terms like “fog of war,” battle fatigue, and “shell shock,” a telling former term for PTSD was “Lack of Moral Fiber” (Pols & Oak, 2007).

Conceptualizing traumatic stress opened the door to addressing suffering that was previously brushed under the rug. This led to more effective treatments and attention to prevention. In spite of great progress, we have only scratched the surface. War always has a trickle-down effect, in every basic sphere of human life. Could we make progress without violence, or are we dependent on learning things the hard way, as a species? Morality is crucial here, because related ethics and values create boundaries, constraints on the evolving systems in which we ecologically reside. In turn, these constraints shape our systems in the direction we want. If we can't agree on the bottom-up influences that constitute the rules of our own ecological niche, we give up the assurance of future safety and satisfaction. I hypothesize that not only traumatic stress, but collective moral injury diverts attention and resources sorely needed to repair and develop beyond our individual selves—that is to repair and develop our society and our planet. Unaddressed moral injury leads to stagnation and devolution, whereas ongoing moral injury traps us in a state of constant pain and distress. Coupled with the one-two punch of the more widely recognized collective traumatic stress, we can't get our bearing to even discover what the problem is.

### Should Moral Injury Follow in the Footsteps of PTSD?

Will the construct of moral injury follow a path parallel to PTSD and raise awareness of moral injury in other spheres? *Should* moral injury follow suit? Will we survive if we fail to appreciate the widespread role of moral injury and the damage done by avoiding dealing with the causes of collective moral injury? It is easy to see that these issues have been present for all of human history. Although violence has declined across recorded human history, the stakes of losing control are higher than ever before. And this is as much due to the destructive capacity unleashed by technological advancement, which counterbalances the promise of the same advances.

Human destructive instincts, aggression, and competition have been balanced out by innate moral instincts, social, religious, and political institutions, to ensure survival. What has changed recently is the aforementioned bombardment of information and, possibly, an increased awareness of human rights, even if human rights have not been broadly adopted.

In 1948, following World War II and the Holocaust, Eleanor Roosevelt led the charge for the United Nations to create the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), a milestone in human history. This declaration raises awareness, establishes moral standards, and undergirds our understanding of collective moral injury. The first 7 of the 30 Articles of the UDHR (<http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>) are useful to cite here.

#### Article 1

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

#### Article 2

Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.

## Article 3

Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.

## Article 4

No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.

## Article 5

No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

## Article 6

Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law.

## Article 7

All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination.

### Human Rights Awareness Informs Moral Injury

We are arguably in a state of continual moral injury, as well as persistent traumatic distress. I am in a skewed sample because the majority of my friends and colleagues are striving to offer help to others on individual and collective levels, and because I live in a liberal, progressive city, and mainly move in politically progressive circles. In general, we believe in human rights, including the right to live without human-perpetrated trauma, neglect, and abuse, at least. When you speak to people who have opposing views (which I've tried to do when possible), many who were happy about the 2016 election will report feeling triumphant and report parallel feelings of moral injury and traumatic distress leading up to the election. I may not agree with the political positions taken, but I recognize that the underlying feelings and reactions are similar across the board and are something we have in common. It's important to

note however, that the possibility of dialogue across the divide is also seriously limited by the strength of these feelings of injustice on both sides. The fear and confusion over how the other can hold the opinions they do, may lead to difficulty with empathy, feelings of moral outrage, and the impulse to act quickly and decisively in an attempt to achieve restitution.

### A Detailed Discussion of Moral Injury

Jonathan Shay, who has treated combat veterans for many years, has worked to destigmatize PTSD and to present it as an injury rather than an illness. In his books, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (1994) and *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming* (2002), Shay uses his analysis of Greek classics to illuminate what modern combat soldiers experience. Among other thoughts, he discusses what happens when leaders place warriors in morally perilous circumstances. He writes, “Moral injury is:

- A betrayal of what’s right.
- by someone who holds legitimate authority (e.g., in the military—a leader).
- in a high stakes situation.

All three” (Shay, 2014).

From a different point of view, Litz et al. (2009) describe moral injury from the perspective of individual choice, emphasizing the personal impact for a soldier making a difficult decision:

- An act of transgression “that severely and abruptly contradicts” a person’s expectations about moral conduct
- The person “must be (or become) aware of the discrepancy between his or her morals and the experience”
- Which “causes cognitive dissonance and inner conflict”

Regardless of whether the moral injury arises from leadership or oneself, moral injury may happen when we either witness or directly participate in immoral acts (or even potentially, when we simply hear accounts of moral violations), when we do not prevent moral transgressions from taking place, and when we experience reactions that we find inappropriate in response to a moral transgression.

Drescher et al. (2011) conducted a survey to see if the concept of moral injury was considered an appropriate and useful addition to our understanding of combat veterans' experience of war. Is the concept of moral injury valid? Is it necessary to have an additional concept, or is the prevailing construct of PTSD sufficient? Twenty-three health-care and religious professionals with long experience working with the military were interviewed and unanimously agreed that the concept of moral injury was needed and that the concept of PTSD was insufficient to capture the full scope of combat-related issues. Participants suggested changes to improve the existing working definition and language used currently in the moral injury literature. Regardless, whether traumatic or morally injurious, destructive events of human origin—as contrasted with natural events—have a greater negative impact.

In illustrating moral injury, Shay (2014) shares the story of a sniper in a recent war. The sniper is there to protect his fellow Marines, targeted by an enemy sniper. He sights the enemy sniper, and finds that the he has a baby in a sling on his chest, possibly as a human shield. According to the accepted rules of war, he is permitted to take the shot, and is obligated to fulfill his duty to protect his comrades—knowing he will be killing both the man and the baby. He sees the bullet find its mark.

From the point of view of moral betrayal from leadership, the soldier has been placed in a position by his command that puts him in a position where he must take action, which—in turn—violates his moral code not to kill civilians, moreover, not to kill children. Yet the rules of engagement, and his training and code, tell him he must kill the sniper, regardless, in order to protect his fellow soldiers—which is also morally correct. From the point of view of individual autonomy, the soldier has a choice: He can take the shot and violate the moral code of not killing innocents, or he can fail to take the shot, and violate the moral code of protecting his brothers in arms.

Regardless of whether the origin is viewed as coming from leadership or from oneself (or both), moral injury is most damaging when the affected individual experiences it as global, internally generated, and stable over time. This confluence leads to powerfully destructive feelings of shame, which consume one's total sense of self. Litz et al. (2009) note that unlike shame, guilt tends to be more associated with less self-punishment and more likely to move us forward to taking positive steps that address our guilt. That is, guilt tends to mobilize us to act, whereas shame is more likely to lead to inaction, concealment, and social

withdrawal, thereby compounding moral injury and the cutting off of access to sources of relief and repair.<sup>1</sup>

### Moral Repair

As with PTSD, there is often no simple approach to addressing moral injury. Easy answers don't work, and the road to recovery is often a long one. Litz et al. (2009) propose the following stepwise approach, based on approaches modeled after the treatment of PTSD, which addresses both combat-related traumatic loss as well as moral injury. This approach, based on cognitive-behavioral principles (i.e., prolonged exposure and cognitive processing therapy), is called "Adaptive Disclosure" (Steenkamp et al., 2011) and involves the following steps as described in Litz et al. (2009). It isn't clear what would be required to address collective moral injury, but the approach to the individual is, at least, informative:

1. Connection: Formation of a safe, trusting and respectful therapeutic alliance. The therapist must be prepared to work with very difficult clinical material.
2. Preparation and education: Layout of the basic approach and treatment rationale. Understanding what moral injury is and learning how maladaptive coping (e.g., avoidance) perpetuates the problem helps set the stage for treatment.
3. Modified exposure component: Directed, regulated engagement with specific and distressing deployment experiences in a supportive setting works with 4) and 5) below, to pave the way for recovery by allowing access to difficult material to be worked through.
4. Examination and integration: Maladaptive beliefs developed in the aftermath of morally injurious experiences are identified and examined, with the goal of more constructive meanings or, at minimum, developing openness to alternatives. This is important in moving toward self-forgiveness.
5. Dialogue with a benevolent moral authority: This is done as an "open chair" exercise of imaginary dialogue with a respected,

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<sup>1</sup> The distinction between shame and guilt has been explored by many writers, e.g., Levin (1967), Lewis (1971), Morrison (1989), Piers & Singer (1953), and Wurmser (1981).

- caring, moral authority figure who “does not want them [persons affected by moral injury working under their proposed model] to suffer excessively and who feels that forgiveness and reparation is possible” (Litz et al., 2009, p. 703).
6. **Reparation and forgiveness:** Building on the preparation and education step, patient and therapist develop specific behavioral tasks designed to rekindle a more positive sense of self. Litz et al. (2009) note, “The idea of righting a wrong is usually a poor idea because it is typically not possible. In general, the idea is not to try and fix the past, but rather to draw a firm line around the past and its related associations, so that the mistakes of the past do not define the present and the future and so that a pre-occupation with the past does not prevent possible future good” (p. 704).
  7. **Fostering reconnection:** Having developed a trusting relationship and early reparative experiences, the patient is encouraged to build on these gains in building relationships with caring others, and to work on the relationship to oneself. This is facilitated in a planned and careful manner to increase the chances of having successful, positive experiences.
  8. **Planning for the long haul:** Given that this approach is typically time-limited, the conclusion of therapy includes a comprehensive discussion of the future, addressing goals and values, challenges, and particularly in the case of patients returning to active duty, how to address the expectation of subsequent deployments.

### **Moral Injury and PTSD are Complementary**

Moral injury, although sharing some features of PTSD, differs from it in many important ways. First, moral injury is not considered pathological, but a normal human response to moral transgression. Second, the core cause of traumatic reactions relates to fear, horror, and hopelessness, whereas in moral injury the core emotions are guilt, shame, and anger. Moral injury and PTSD share the tendency to relive the event as well as to lead the individual to avoid thinking about it; but whereas PTSD is characterized by overactivation of the nervous system, moral injury is not. Whereas the primary concern in PTSD is safety, the primary concern in moral injury is trust. It is easy to see how they are complementary in understanding human responses to man-made distressing events.

### Concluding Thoughts

Taken together, collective trauma and collective moral injury present a challenge for our species. On a broad societal level, the damage is self-inflicted. It is unclear how much of this is by choice—whether out of evil, human nature, calculated ethical decisions weighing difficult risks and benefits—or from unconscious factors that elude collective repair. We may be at a crossroads—can we come together, fulfilling the vision of universal human rights, or will we continue to inch closer to the precipice? Do we need to move the *doomsday clock* closer and closer to midnight in order for sanity to kick in, or are we a lost cause? We have been living in the Age of Dissociation, and the election of Trump represents a breakdown of dissociative defenses, on collective and individual levels.

Having an orientation toward compassion and human rights can help us come together, but the adoption of such philosophies across many cultural and religious groups happens at the proverbial snail's pace. Moving in that direction doesn't address the issues that arise in the meantime, when some groups are not on the same page and aren't playing by those rules (even when they say they are). This leads to a justification for aggression out of necessity, inevitably perpetuating the cycle. We can't place all the responsibility on our leaders, but it isn't at all clear how individuals can have any impact on a collective level. Recognizing the universality of collective moral injury and traumatic stress may be a step in the right direction, yet given the seemingly incompatible world-views emerging in the last year, finding areas of common ground seems increasingly tenuous. It may be that things have to get even worse in order for conditions that might motivate us toward constructive dialogue can be created (if that is even possible).

As time passes, rather than seeing a resolution of early concerns over the election, many find that the morally injurious and fear-provoking activity has become more entrenched. Although Trump retains a solid but small base of supporters, his approval ratings continue to drop to historic lows for a new president, reflecting moral outrage as well as increasing fear of serious consequences, ranging from an erosion of basic democratic principles and human rights, to the loss of our safe and comfortable way of life. Even some in the GOP are separating from Trump, and his administration appears to be in a state of perpetual chaos.

Many of us experience ongoing moral injury when Trump equates violent fascist groups with liberal protestors, when he fails to denounce racist and prejudicial hate speech, and when he twists reality by using Orwellian language. We experience fear when he flirts with nuclear annihilation in sparing with North Korea and when he undermines long-standing alliances with other nations—even appearing to serve as a pawn for unfriendly foreign powers. His arguable abuse of the power of his position in making executive decrees and recently using his power to pardon, undermines the moral fabric of our nation.

The nation's latent fragmentation is coming to the surface in reaction to Trump's election. He may be seen as an internal source of provocation, rather than an external threat. Although it is easy to panic and despair at our prospects with Trump in office, one might argue that the current circumstances, in spite of the uncertain outcome, are just what the nation needs in order to address long-standing problems. Perhaps Trump's election has created the circumstances by which change can take place by rendering collective dissociative defenses ineffective.

In such a scenario, traumatic distress and moral injury are breaking through collective dissociative defenses and forcing focused action born of conflict from previously ambivalent groups. It is tempting to analogize the United States of America to an individual patient in seeing the shift from dissociation and ambivalence to the emergence of discrete self-states with specific agendas and conflict. From an optimistic psychoanalytic point of view, the emergence of conflict is a step in the right direction, creating the impetus to arrive at better compromises. Of course, from a pessimistic point of view, latent aggressive and self-destructive tendencies may win out, with a risk of real damage from internal and external factors. As much as it may be important to recognize all the different voices present in our nation and listen respectfully with the intention of seeking mutuality, when radical hateful and murderous groups are present, the first priority must go to basic safety and morality—though the path there is uncertain.

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