

## **From the muck of moral outrage and contempt to the meta-muck of actual morality**

I started writing this post Tuesday in response to one member's strong objection to another member's strong objection to a third member's strong reaction (which he began posting about weeks ago and has kept going in a series of interesting if controversial posts) to the predominantly anti-Trump pro-inclusion sentiment of our listserve. Since then, the tone of the discussion has become much more subdued but the underlying divisions and divisiveness remain, so I'm going to go ahead and post this anyway, both adding to the divisiveness and explaining it and suggesting an explanation for the recent shift toward a more collegial tone as well.

I'll begin by adding to the divisiveness with one last comment about the recent criticism of the media for spreading unsubstantiated rumors about Trump. There is so much horrifying information about Trump that HAS been substantiated by his own words and actions, and by his attempted actions that have been thwarted by the free press and by the independent congress and judiciary whose freedom and independence he is trying so hard to destroy, that it's like criticizing someone for spreading unsubstantiated rumors about atrocities committed by Putin or by Isis. Whatever is being reported that may be unsubstantiated (and leaks from reliable sources don't count as unsubstantiated) it is all trivial in comparison to what's obvious objective fact. And speaking of unsubstantiated rumors spread by the media, has everyone been reading about the Sinclair Broadcast Group of local TV stations that broadcast primarily in the areas of the country where Trump's base lives? If not, you should google it. Here's a link I just found:  
[www.mediamatters.org/networks-and-outlets/...](http://www.mediamatters.org/networks-and-outlets/...)

And media aside, Trump himself can't speak three sentences without using the rumor-mongering words "People are saying" or "I was told" as a preamble to telling an unsubstantiated outright lie that in fact nobody else is saying and nobody told him. His habitual lying is so frequent and has been substantiated by so much fact-checking, that it is simply impossible to believe that ANYthing he says EVER has any substantiable substance to it. The only thing we can be certain about is that nothing is more important to him—not his children, not the constitution, not the oath of office he swore, not the lives or well-being of the American public—than to be seen and admired as big and strong and smart and very very very rich. That's not an unsubstantiated rumor or a diagnosis. That's an objective fact that is apparent to billions of people around the world who are listening to what Trump says and watching what he does.

OK, enough polarizing divisive ranting. Now I want to shift gears to a more peaceful meta-level look at polarized divisiveness in general, and in psychoanalysis in particular. I'll begin by responding to everyone who deplores the divisiveness of our recent discussion with the third member mentioned above and who have deplored the divisiveness of so many other listserve discussions over the years, with a historical and empathic observation that I've posted many times before: There has never been a week in

the entire history of psychoanalysis when important leaders of our field have NOT been engaged in passionately prejudiced divisive contemptuous disputes with other important leaders of our field. The moralistic tone of self-righteous outrage and contempt that has always informed both sides of this kind of psychoanalytic dispute, starting with Freud v Adler and Jung, is exactly the same whether we are discussing American politics or psychoanalytic politics. And it's exactly like the tone of the debate between Republicans and Democrats which has become increasingly moralistic, mutually contemptuous and intransigently polarizing ever since the Reagan years. And it's exactly like the tone of every flame war ever waged online over anything. So this tendency toward moral outrage, moral contempt, demonizing the other and intransigently dividing ourselves into us v them is clearly built into human nature and it's an aspect of human nature that psychoanalysts have always enacted and never come close to understanding. We have terms to describe it but no real explanation for it, and clearly no control over our repetitive repetition compulsion to enact it on each other.

In thinking about the recent dispute provoked by "us" provoking an offended member to provoke back provoking us to provoke that member.....etc., it occurred to me that one thing blocking our understanding may be that we react differently to moral outrage and moral contempt when in fact they are two sides of the same coin, expressing the same fundamental motivation and having much the same impact on others. The main difference is that people expressing moral outrage generally SOUND unreasonable, and when people respond back with commensurate moral outrage, they sound either just as unreasonable or maybe a smidge less because it seems like they were provoked. People expressing moral contempt, on the other hand, can often sound extremely reasonable while expressing their contempt in such a subtle, disguised way that when other people respond to it with commensurate moral outrage they sound REALLY REALLY unreasonable, because the morally contemptuous provocateur sounded so reasonable and his or her contempt was so well disguised that the natural morally outraged response to him or her seems unprovoked and completely unwarranted. Of course it should be noted that moral contempt doesn't have to be subtle. Perhaps the most important reason Hillary lost was that her moral contempt for Trump was so painfully obvious.

The kind of seemingly reasonable moral contempt I'm talking about is much more subtle and is very familiar to psychoanalysts. It was a tactic much employed by many respected BOPS spokespersons over the years until not too long ago. More recently the aforementioned third member around whom the current dispute revolves has shown us a whole new way of doing it. This member has now come out of the closet as knowing exactly what he has been doing all along, first in poking gently at our obvious liberal bias and then poking harder and harder the more polarized responses he got, until it is now clear that he is just as prejudiced and polarizingly divisive as the rest of us. But this only became clear recently because the initial impression he had created was of being a naïve friendly open-minded country boy unschooled in the surprisingly passionate argumentative ways of us city folk. So the first member and others of us were

predisposed to feel guilty and/or angry when someone like the second member took open offense at the third member's much more subtly offensive posts because we simply didn't notice the moral contempt in those posts. On the contrary, many of us saw this third member as an innocent victim. These rumors of his innocence are unsubstantiated, however, because, as the member himself recently wrote, he's always been someone who knows how to give as good as he gets and he certainly hasn't been shy about continuing to give it, and he knew from the start what he was going to get in return because it's exactly what he was objecting to to begin with.

I hope this member understands my ad hominem analysis of his rhetorical tactics in the "it takes one to know one" spirit in which I intend it. When it comes to moral outrage and contempt, I am as deplorable as anyone, more deplorable than most. I've done a ton of writing since I was an undergraduate in the 1960s, much of it for publication or public lectures, much of it for posting on ApsaA's listserv, and I can't think of anything of substance that I've ever written that wasn't motivated at least in part by moral outrage and contempt. Without the fire lit in me by these moral/moralistic emotions, I'm not sure anything would have mattered enough to me to write about it. On the other hand I've never written anything effective that didn't require me to tone down the outrage and contempt and focus much more on spelling out what I believe is true and right, instead of attacking what I believe is false and wrong. Whenever I've failed to tone it down, I've failed to get my real message across.

I have also gotten a sense from this third member's posts that he is a poker player. If so, then he knows that in poker there are two ways to win. One is to bully your opponents. The other is to trap them. Both work. Both are fair. Good players know how to do both and I'm guessing he is a good player. My sense is that he successfully trapped some of us into trying to bully him when we didn't have a winning hand, much like Trump trapped the liberal elites into trying to bully him during the campaign (though unlike our member, Trump did his trapping unintentionally, by being so flagrantly uninformed about everything except how to be a bully that he seemed an easy target). In any case, Republicans are generally better at both bullying and trapping than Democrats are and us Democrats don't take kindly to being shown up that way and our largely ineffectual self-defeating reaction is to become very strident in our moral outrage and very assertive in our certainty that we are right and the Republicans are wrong. Not as assertive or as certain as the Donald, mind you, but pretty darn certain.

Back to the general topic: The key words in discussing this kind of implacably divisive, relentlessly polarizing passionately contemptuous ideological flame war are "contemptuous" and "ideological." And at a deeper level the key word behind both of these words is "moral." Ideological flame wars and ideological real wars are always fueled by moral passions— especially outrage and contempt—against someone or something we see as threatening to our most deeply cherished moral values. That's why we call it moral outrage rather than simply rage. I don't know whether anyone else uses

the term "moral contempt" because this is the first time I've ever consciously recognized it and begun to think about how ubiquitous it is. (Whoops, I just googled it and discovered the term has been in widespread use for a long time. Apparently Nietzsche wrote that "Moral contempt is a far greater indignity and insult than any kind of crime.") In terms of its ubiquitousness, all those economically and politically disenfranchised Trump supporters who hate the liberal elites for treating them with moral contempt, themselves in turn have shown just as much moral contempt for the liberal elites.

The take-home point being that morally outraged and morally contemptuous ideological/political flame wars are always deep down about morality vs immorality, with both sides claiming the moral high ground from which they can then contemptuously look down on the immoral other. You would think this is a simple truism—that debates informed by moral outrage and moral contempt must necessarily be about morality v immorality. And I do think it *is* a truism but it's one that needs to be highlighted and asterisked because the truth of it is very far from obvious. When "we" express moral outrage and moral contempt against "them" it is almost always *implicitly* and *unconsciously* expressed in the tone, almost never explicitly and consciously expressed in the text of what we say or write against each other.

There are a number of possible explanations for this almost universal lack of explicitness in stating that "we" consider ourselves to be moral in a particular way that we consider "them" to be outrageously and/or contemptibly immoral. For one thing, it's clearly impolite to say that out loud. But more importantly, it's SO impolite, and so incendiary, to level such an accusation, that I believe we are rarely conscious when we do it that this is what we are actually doing. Instead we tell ourselves well rationalized stories that our differences are about competing political—policy, economic, environmental, states rights, civil rights, 1<sup>st</sup> amendment, 2<sup>nd</sup> amendment, etc.—agendas (as we are doing now with the tone-softening posts from both sides) or about competing psychoanalytic theories, and we never notice the competing moral values and moral passions that inform these competing political agendas, still less the moral values and moral passions that inform our competing psychoanalytic theories.

In almost all such polarized us v them good v evil conflicts fueled by moral outrage/contempt on both sides, it turns out that both sides have some piece of the truth, and some genuinely moral basis for their implicit tonal accusations that the other side is immoral in its approach to whatever issue is being debated. And I believe this does apply even to the vitriolically moralistic debate between pro-Trump and anti-Trump factions in our country, where accusations of pure evil are all but explicit. The problem is, it doesn't apply to Trump himself, who appears to be incapable of speaking without lying, appears to have no respect for other human beings and to value nothing except his own self-interest. As far as one can reasonably tell from his words and actions, Trump has no piece of the truth and no genuine morality whatsoever. When he argues against anyone or anything, he never does it with a sense of moral outrage or moral contempt. Rage and

contempt, yes. Moral, no. And his aim in these arguments is to do to "them" what feels to him like the worst thing anyone could do to him, only do it to them before they have a chance to do it to him: namely, ridicule and humiliate them, make them feel small and stupid.

So as I see it, Trump represents a terrifying moral vacuum, an amoral combatively aggrandized public image designed to hide his lack of private substance, and everyone on both sides who actually cares about morality is terrified of being sucked into that vacuum. Hence the unusually strident, unprecedentedly vicious tone of moral outrage and contempt between pro-Trump and anti-Trump factions. Both sides are forced to compensate for Trump's lack of morality by escalating our own already prejudiced Republican v Democrat moral judgments that the other side's beliefs do violence to everything we hold sacred. The only way to resolve this impasse is to collapse the vacuum by impeachment, or by the Republican congress turning en masse against Trump as they did in the recent vote on sanctions against Russia. When that happens we can get back to our previous more civilized level of moral outrage and contempt for each other, which itself was hardly civilized.

Ultimately, I have little hope that this situation will improve because I think the moral vacuum that is Trump is just the inevitable culmination of the increasingly amoral increasingly unbridled capitalist greed that has been running rampant in our society, poisoning us from within, since the Reagan years. I'm not saying that capitalism is any more or less amoral than socialism or communism or any other ism. I'm saying that, whatever the designated ism of a society, the center of the society cannot hold unless that center is intrinsically moral. Without such a shared moral center—which the declaration of independence was long thought to represent—it seems inevitable that our political parties will continue to cling to divisive moralistic polarities fueled by outrage and contempt.

In psychoanalysis, our prospects for resolution are much better I believe. My proposed solution to our entrenched history of psychoanalytic divisiveness is that we become conscious of what we are and have endlessly been enacting via our moral outrage and contempt against "the other side;" more specifically, become conscious of and put into words the actual moral values we are fighting FOR as well as those we are fighting AGAINST. What?? Psychoanalysts being unconscious of our own moral values?? How could that be?? Well, it's not an across-the-board unconsciousness. We may be very well able to articulate the moral values that go with being a Democrat and with being a Republican, and yet be completely unaware that there are intrinsic moral values that go with being a psychoanalyst. We were bullied by Freud into believing that there weren't any such values, and that there should never be any such values, only the one true value of scientific objectivity. So whenever a moral value or impulse threatens to become conscious in our work with patients, or in our arguments with each other, our deeply ingrained archaic Freudian superego crushes it into submission before we have a chance

to notice that we all secretly, implicitly, view psychoanalysis as an intrinsically moral enterprise.

Throughout our history there have always been very definite specifiable moral values implicit (and unconscious) in all our ideas about what psychoanalysis is and what it should be and what it isn't and shouldn't be. I believe the main reason we have never been able to agree about what psychoanalysis is, should be, isn't and shouldn't be is that we are unconscious of the moral basis for our opinions on these matters so we don't actually know our own opinions as thoroughly as we should. Once we know what we really feel about psychoanalysis, including our moral feelings about it, then we can have a real dialogue and see how much commonality and how much difference of opinion we really have about what psychoanalysis is, should be, isn't and shouldn't be. If anyone's interested, I have published a couple of preliminary papers on this topic:

Frattaroli, E. (2015). Do psychoanalysts know what's good for them. If so, why are they always arguing about it. If not how do they, and we, know what's good for us? In Salman Akhtar, Ed. *Human Goodness: Origins, Manifestations and Clinical Implications* London: Rowman & Littlefield.

Frattaroli, E. (2013) (Discussion of Stanley Coen's paper) Reflections on the absence of morality in psychoanalytic theory and practice. In S. Akhtar, ed. *Guilt: Origins, Manifestations, ananagement*. Plymouth UK: Jason Aronson.

OK. End of sermon.

Elio Frattaroli, M.D.  
[www.healingthesoul.net](http://www.healingthesoul.net)