Sīla and Triangles: My Ethical Foundation

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Author Note

This paper is being submitted on July 11th, 2016 as a final paper for PSY 5703 describing

the origins and qualities of my personal ethical framework.

I am happy to have the opportunity to process my thoughts about the origins of my

personal ethical code and put them into words. I am quite sure that I have a distinct and readily

accessible sense of morality and find it easy to translate these into meaningful decisions about

ethical behavior, but I am not able to verbally articulate a generalized version this framework

outside of a case by case basis. My hope is that this paper will give me the opportunity to find

the words for this framework and especially the forces that continuously compel me to use it.

Sharpening The Knife

My ethical framework is informed by a combination of Vipassanā meditation practice and

Bowen Theory, which both aim to discover and adjust to the qualities and processes that are

universal to all living experience. When I say "informed," I don't mean to say that I follow some

scriptural or theoretical plan as a mode of belief. Instead, these two schools offer a hypothetical

framework which I continually give trial, test against my own experiences, and integrate into a

personalized form which is something close to second nature. Thus, scripture or primary

theoretical sources only point the way for personal practice.

The scriptures describing Vipassanā meditation, or the earliest pre-sectarian teachings of

the historical Buddha, lay out a moral framework and ethical code which is described as a

prerequisite step to the later stages of actual meditation practice. In retreat, this code takes the

form of five simple precepts for beginners: to abstain from lying and harsh or backbiting words,

to abstain from killing, to abstain from stealing, to abstain from sexual misconduct, and to

abstain from taking intoxicants. On the surface this seems like a common and straightforward list

of moral aspirations which overlaps with other ethical codes like the Ten Commandments or the

General Principles listed in the APA Ethics Code of Conduct. But the origin of these precepts are

absolutely pragmatic, and the reasons for each rule are intended to be experienced directly and exactly by each practitioner so that their necessity is as plain as the need to breathe. This allows each person to develop and a personal framework from their own experience and in their own words.

Classical Vipassanā meditation consists of three stages of sīla, samādhi, and paññā, each stage building upon and informing the previous stage. The first stage of *sīla* is to develop a base of moral behavior, and is required before moving seriously to the second stage of developing mental precision, or *samādhi*. The second stage is in turn required before the third stage of developing insight into the subtle nature of mind and matter, called *paññā,* or wisdom.

The first stage consists of simply adhering to the five precepts, and attending a retreat in a qualified center places one in an environment that is conveniently arranged to prevent you from breaking these precepts; there is no talking, no touching, nothing to steal, nothing to kill (except some bugs, microbes, etc. in which killing is practically unavoidable), and no intoxicants to be taken. So by entering a retreat environment, one get this first stage for free.

The second stage of Vipassanā is to develop precise and prolonged attention to a single point under the nostrils and above the upper lip, where the breath generates a subtle sensation on the skin of the body not normally apparent without practice. Sharpening my mind in this way in the second stage is required to be able to sustain the infinitely more intricate work of the third stage of penetrating insight. I have also found that achievement in this second stage of meditation serves as a vital control variable in the scientific experiment of finding which behaviors are beneficial to me and which are harmful to me in daily life. Harmful behaviors negatively affect my concentration, and beneficial behaviors help my concentration. The ability to hold relatively

sustained attention on a single point for an arbitrary amount of time is said to usually develop

after a few or several years of at least two hours daily in conjunction with one full 10-day retreat

a year. The first and second stages inform the third, although after a sufficient amount of practice

a meditator can switch between the three as needed. Nevertheless, my own experience confirms

the Vipassanā hypothesis which states that that no matter how much effort one puts in, it just

isn't possible to progress in the second stage in any serious way until progress is made observing

the five basic moral precepts.

For example, if I am constantly complaining to one person about some other person, there

seems to actually be a biochemical response which triggers a subtle amount of agitation in my

mind. In meditation, this agitation may manifest as a nagging thought about how much that

person annoys me[1] which then prohibits me from focusing on a single point for prolonged

periods. We may call commonly this unconscious pattern "conscience." In short, the habit of

backbiting speech makes it harder to meditate, and engaging in less backbiting speech makes it

easier to meditate. The same goes for lying or speaking harshly, sleeping around, drinking any

more than a milliliter of beer or drip coffee, any kind of stealing no matter how small. I find that

there is always something buried deep inside my mind that protests against these "bad" behaviors

and I have found that the only thing in the whole world that will make it go away is to actually

stop the behavior altogether. So considering the assumption of this basic "conscience" process of

cause and effect, it is easy to see that these types of experiences allow a moral framework to

develop naturally apart from any dogma or blind belief, and one where my understanding of the

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[1] This annoyance is no doubt a projection of my inability to act productively to remedy the situation.

necessity of each rule is unshakable regardless of how well I am able to adhere to it. Because my experience confirms the hypothesis defined by the Vipassanā scriptures, the ethical code I have adopted is the one laid down by the five basic precepts.

The third stage of Vipassanā is paññā, or the development of equanimity through wisdom. The development of samādhi, or concentration, is just sharpening the knife in order to prepare for the real practice which develops paññā; a deeply precise and methodical analysis of the nature of the entire body and it's contents, i.e. sensations. In this stage, you scan the body for subtler and subtler sensations, slowly moving part-by-part every few seconds through roughly 1-inch sections. This excruciatingly meticulous process is intended to replicate the development of awareness of subtle sensations from the second stage, but this time including the entire body one part at a time. This this stage is infinitely more difficult than the second stage. It proceeds until literally the entire part of the body, including internal organs, eyes, bones, ligaments, etc, can be felt inside-and out in any instant, with no blind spots and favoring no spots over others as we are all so inclined to do. But without developing a peaceful and attentive mind in the second stage, the mind will regularly wander away form the work and will not be sensitive enough to feel sensations throughout the entire body. In essence, this awareness of the entire body is what Daniel Siegel (2012) and Bessel van der Kolk (2015) describe as the key to emotional integration and self-regulation. A rudimentary full-body awareness at this stage can be reached in a few to several years of practice as prescribed, and ideally held to some extent throughout all activities of the day even when not meditating.

This three-stage process is hypothesized to work like a non-linear equation where each coefficient effects the next on a progressively greater logarithmic scale. All three variables occur

and effect the result simultaneously yet each previous step informs the next. My own experience

this hypothesis, that morality is not just the kindergarten of mental health which can be attained

and left behind but it is an integral part of an ongoing process who's effects are multiplied

innumerably throughout the next two stages. *Thus, I am convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt*

the entirety of my mental and physical wellbeing is impacted more than anything by my

attentional ability and insight into the reactive nature of my mind and body. In short, progress on

this path is the most important thing in my life.

What is important for the purpose of this paper is that this ethical framework has arisen in

large part from a very basic, scientific investigation into the nature of my self and others, and

arisen in smaller part from the rules passed down from the moral collective. Or at least the

meditative practice moves the locus of conditioning further away from the collective and further

toward empirical experience. I don't always understand the exact mechanics of why these things

work the way they do, but the evidence becomes clearer and clearer the more I practice.

The Nausea

The takeaway from my experiences with Vipassanā is this. Once I started practicing I

slowly began to realize that I get a little *nauseous[2]* when I break the precepts. Today I am also

realizing that I get nauseous when others break them too. This nausea is natural; it is generated

unconsciously. That is, the reason my mind and body generate nausea isn't because I'm stuck on

the conceptual *rule* that backbiting is bad[3], but because my mind now calculates all the possible

systemic outcomes of this or that action, and my body gives me the nauseous valuation that these

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[2] I will be referring to this nausea throughout this paper, as its purpose is central to my thesis.

[3] Which would be a conscious process.

outcomes do not look good. For example, if a person in a group starts backbiting another person who isn't present, I can usually see the shift in energy drawing the people in the room giddily together and pushing the absent person further away, planting a small seed of resentment on both sides.

I am also aware of deeper and more profound processes at work in that situation that are harder to describe. I have learned through meditation that the more I give in to any kind of craving, especially when I don't recognize it as craving, the more of that habit pattern I am going to have to "clean out" later through rigorous practice. If the very goal of the practice is to clean out *all* of these unhealthy patterns, then it is quite disheartening to watch these habits get multiplied and multiplied. I personally know that when I give into some craving of the moment and break any of the aforementioned precepts, I suffer for it in that very moment and even more in the long-term as the habit pattern resurfaces at the next opportunity. This could take the form of backbiting to make myself feel more "worthy" by putting others down, being sexually promiscuous to satisfy my sexual craving, or simply taking a shot of whiskey or espresso to help ignore this or that little discomfort of the day, and so on. Each and every time I do one of these things I am conditioning myself to do it again or the same reason, and the more problems I am creating for myself in the future. This is basic behaviorism.

What is interesting is that I do not get nauseous simply watching someone break these precepts. Instead, I get nauseous watching someone break them with no awareness of the larger systemic consequences. Killing for killing's sake, sex for sex's or ego's sake, or ignorance of the repercussions of backbiting can all be very difficult to take on a constant basis when the repercussions are so obvious to me. Further, through meditation I have gained a tangible sense of

my own neuroplasticity, and if the population is anything like me the effects of breaking these

precepts create deep grooves in a persons mind that takes far, far more work to correct than most

people realize. "Quite disheartening to watch" then becomes an understatement. As you can

imagine, this makes it difficult as well as fascinating to watch a presidential election cycle, just

as well as watching or participating in a mostly unconscious classroom discussion!

Filling in the Cracks

The Vipassanā way as described above is complete in itself. The ethical code defined by

the precepts is informed by the practice, and the practice, observation and equanimity with

bodily sensations, is available 24/7 and in every situation life can present. But just as the abstract

simplicity of the practice amplifies the profundity of its results, it also limits its accessibility to

most people in the world. Reducing the entire challenge of psychopathology to the equanimous

observation of sensations through all circumstances is a practice that takes incredible will. It also

requires a degree of abstract faith because accepting or realizing that bodily sensations are the

key to all of our suffering is quite a stretch for most people. Further, any real faith (i.e. not a

blind faith) is only based in the reality considerable personal experience, which can only feasibly

be gained for this style of psychosomatic meditation through the kind of prolonged dive that is

possible at an intense 10-day course. Plenty of people find other barriers to Vipassanā as well,

such as misconceiving it as incompatible with their religion (which is actually impossible as

described above unless the religion explicitly requires violence as a fundamental practice),

severe mental illness or exceptionally low intelligence which makes it impossible to comprehend

the instructions properly, or an the results extreme past conditioning like addiction, trauma, or

psychosis, which requires a slower initial approach to practice.

This is where Bowen Theory comes in. This scientific theory was constructed in modern times and points to the same fundamental processes universal to all life as Vipassanā, but from the relatively superficial and intellectual level common to Western psychology. Instead of improving health by observing and developing equanimity with bodily sensations, systems thinkers observe and develop equanimity with their familial and social relationships as relationships are seen as projective material for the inner impurities and conflicts in an individual's mind.

The aspiration to perfect Bowen Theory's core concepts of *differentiation*, *triangulation*, *emotional cutoff*, and the *multi-generational transmission process*[4] (Kerr & Bowen, 1988) points to an ethical ideal that matches the intention of the moral precepts laid down by Vipassanā practice. That is, a person who avoids backbiting speech, i.e. triangulation[5], is implicitly forced to atone for their mistakes and weaknesses, never wastes energy complaining about their problems and instead only acts to improve their situation in productive ways. A person who is

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[4] The remaining four concepts of *nuclear family emotional process*, *family projection process*, *sibling position*, and *societal emotional process* are redundant for the purposes of this paper.

[5] Triangulation in this context is specifically a reaction to anxiety involving three people where two are closer and one is the "odd man out." Triangulation in systems theory is similar yet separate from a psychological "triad" or other similar terms which operate in an Oedipal context. For example situations that involve more than three people involve sets of interlocking triangles, regardless of the generational status of each node.

well differentiated[6] is not shaken by the insults of others and does not obsess about events that

may or may not come to pass. A person who does not engage in emotional cutoff will approach

frustrating relationships with constructive vigor and commitment instead of running away to

lower their anxiety. They will rise above difficult situations and produce thank you notes instead

of insults. This person is a connector, they bring people together, and utilize their well

differentiated triune-brain[7] to resolve issues intelligently and with real, mammalian empathy. A

person who fully comprehends the multi-generational transmission process, that the valence of

one's actions are multiplied time and again through the mental and physical inheritance of their

children and acquaintances, behaves in ways that create good outcomes and contribute to the

health of others for the good of infinite generations to come.

Now, Bowen Theory is a relatively intellectual theory and committed Vipassanā

practitioners might avoid engaging a framework that requires such "over-thinking." But for the

many people who cannot engage in the more difficult practice of Vipassanā, Bowen Theory

offers an easier, albeit slower, way to practice the same moral framework. It also provides a

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[6] *Differentiation* in this context is a biological term not to be confused with *individuation,* which is a psychological concept. Differentiation is meant to be a universal concept portable to all cultures, and is defined in part by a person's amount of reactivity in the face of anxiety, e.g including but not limited to cortical arousal. Even depression is seen as a compensatory response to anxiety somewhere in the system. Thus, the more differentiated a person is, the more they are informed but not ruled by their emotions, and are able to think as well as feel. Individuation is a psychological concept that describes the process of separating and defining a separate ego-self apart from one's relations. While Jung himself included re-entry into one's societal context as a vital last phase of individuation, the process is often seen more as a separation than an integration.

[7] MacLean's triune brain model divides the brain into reptilian, paleomammalian, and neomammalian parts, which Bowen roughly organizes into a hierarchy of consciousness including the emotional, feeling, and thinking systems.

conduit to communicate the essence of Vipassanā in elementistic and mechanistic Western terms

(Puhakka, 2015), making it easy to integrate with the behaviorism of the West.

An Integrative Vignette

I had just broken silence at a 10-day Vipassanā retreat in January 2016, when I began a

conversation with a more advanced meditator about the 20-day retreats. This person had all the

qualities of a very accomplished meditator, with a strong conceptual grasp on the practice but

also that distinct Vipassanā steadiness in his speech and movements. "Accomplished" in this

context means that they have likely participated in many 20 and 30-day silent retreats, with

continuous meditation often extending beyond the officially scheduled 11 hours and into all

hours of the night. For someone at my relatively low stage of practice of just several 10-day

retreats, it is very easy to look up to a person with these qualities.

He began the conversation by sharing his observations about my practice and provided

advice on how to practice in the future. He spoke with an authority quite different from the

teachers in our tradition, and it felt like a breath of fresh air to have someone give me

straightforward and even creative answers about practical things I had been wondering about for

some time. However, some of his advice also contradicted the teachers' basic instructions, which

cast a shadow of doubt and confusion about foundational parts of my practice. He went on to tell

me about his forthcoming book outlining his personal discoveries which he deemed perfectly

generalizable to the greater population despite the teachers' warning against it. Nevertheless, the

book sounded intriguing and I felt excited to see it. Then finally, he asked me not to mention our

conversation to any of the teachers. This last request raised a bright red flag in my body telling

me that something was wrong, yet I was unable to tap deep enough into the sensations to feel

exactly what it was. So I deferred to Bowen Theory to decipher this red flag on an intellectual level.

The meditator had created a triangle by offering a 'special' relationship between the two of us, thereby alienating the teachers. This triangulation would be a sure-fire way to systemic breakdown, which means that the results would have latent undesirable ripple effects through the relationships of all the individuals involved[8]. In this case, accepting the invitation would leave me to contend with a sense of skepticism about the validity of the teachings and teachers, and anxiety about what to accept and what to deny in their efforts to help with my practice. To be clear, I think healthy scientific skepticism toward a teacher or teaching is a good thing, but the specific content of our conversation suggested a skepticism that was unscientific and would be too convoluted and difficult to resolve. For the other meditator, my acceptance of this "special relationship" would only help dig him further into this harmful pattern of isolation that he had developed, however subtle it appeared to be in this moment. For the teachers, they may suffer relatively little from this triangle until the two of us had expanded our "special" relationship to include other meditators in attempts to relieve the nausea we had already created within ourselves. Thus, an infirm moral base can multiply just as a firm moral base can multiply. As I understand it, this sort of split in the system of a group is the same psychotic split that occurs in the system of the psyche, and if it continues the long-term effects are fragmentation, conflict, and eventual resolution, although one that is dearly bought (Papero, 2015).

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[8] Previously in this paper I explained my "calculations" of these systemic repercussions and the generation of nausea that accompanies undesirable results.

In the end I constructed an ethical solution which fit my current moral framework. I decided that the offer for triangulation from the meditator was inappropriate and served no purpose other than to satisfy his hunger for intellectual or emotional status, and that reacting with any negativity in response to this action would also serve no purpose other than to satisfy the same hunger within myself. So I worked hard to sit through the uncomfortable conversation (by continually observing the unpleasant bodily sensations without reacting), smiled genuinely to maintain an empathic connection with the other meditator, and resolved to consult with a teacher about the situation after I got home. This kept my actions productive and free from the traps of triangulation, vilification, and any resulting disunity. As it happened, avoiding an emotional cutoff with this person kept the door open to a someone who is a total dictionary for great scholarly works in the tradition!

But the challenge did not stop there. I found it important to refrain from revealing any identifying information whatsoever about the meditator to the teacher, including his name and gender. I also made a point to keep the frame of my question directed towards myself and my own practice to avoid falling into the trap of complaining about the meditator. After all, complaining would serve no purpose than to ally myself with the teacher against the meditator (although a good teacher, like any highly mature person, would not have participated in this triangle had I offered it.). I simply wrote something to the effect of: "Dear teacher, in a conversation on day ten of a recent retreat, another meditator suggested that I change such-and-such in my practice because it has such-and-such effect and this appears to conflict with the instructions given by the teachers. This person seemed to know what they are talking about, but I'm confused. What do you think?" This constructive request offered all of the information that

the teacher needed to answer my question about practice, and also opened the door for them to

re-clarify the dangers of particular kinds of conversations about practice in their own words

without vilifying the other meditator. I found their response informative and eloquent. In fact, it

felt so much more mature and balanced that it cleared up any doubts or confusion I had held

about who's advice to take.

So here we can see the beginning of an ethical framework arising from a set of moral

aspirations. After all, what is a triangle, but a primal attempt to avoid some discomfort by pulling

in an external stimulus, i.e. another person, to take the pain away and make us feel warm and

fuzzy again. Bowen taught that this reaction is a natural attempt to relieve anxiety but becomes

harmful when abused as a fixed pattern. This exploitation is exactly what the historical Buddha

taught his followers to avoid by teaching sīla, or morality as the first stage of Vipassanā. It is

clear to me through practice and observation that triangles relieve anxiety in the short term but

fix the problem in place, so is logical to conclude that the result of not engaging in a triangle is

having to *confront one's emotions by actually feeling them*. That implies an experience that is as

dirty and nasty as life has to offer; not blaming other people or circumstances for my

discomforts; calmly applying cold water to a skin burn instead of frantically disrupting the peace

of others; working to stop looking outside of myself for peace; just sitting in the *shit soup* of the

moment. In my practice, the result of sitting in the shit soup is that over time it becomes apparent

that no discomfort (or comfort!) is permanent. Instead, they arise and pass in cycles hour to hour,

but also micro-cycles from minute to minute, and nano-cycles from moment to moment. Once

this profoundly universal pattern is felt in all sensational experiences, it is easier to taste the shit

soup while simultaneously feeling that there are little breaks to be had within the experience

itself, and that it will eventually end altogether as all things do. Really, this is just basic maturity and what divides animals and human children, and human children from human adults. The pain is finally seen for what it is: 5% physical and 95% mental. It becomes clear that every up has a down, and every down has an up; that there are two sides of every coin; that *this too shall pass*. That unique ability to reflect on the reality of the experience is what allows the reactivity to decrease, and the suffering to go down.

Thus, whether in the context of an individual or an entire family or a political system, moving *away* from backbiting in its rawest form means moving *toward* myself, and a more integrated self where good and bad emotions are all felt together simultaneously. In this sense, less reactivity means more feeling, more empathy, and a natural desire to help others overcome the same challenges I am working so hard to overcome within myself. But this reflection is not easy. In fact most people say it is the hardest thing to do in life. In fact, Micheal Kerr, one of Bowen's closest colleagues, said that this type of reflection requires "a quantum leap in the conceptual capacity of the observer" (Kerr, 1981).

Here my experience intersects with Kohlberg's stages of moral development, where instead of following along with a moral code "just because" they told me to, the precise implications of the moral code come to light and I develop a sense of necessity in enforcing the code: *to avoid the nausea*. This nausea has become the propellant for a more compassionate mind; it generates the will to act simultaneously for others and for self with the understanding that we are all linked in a causal web of action and reaction, the universal government of which is so clearly defined through the ethical code of the Vipassanā precepts, the Ten Commandments, the APA Ethical Code of Conduct, or what have you.

To summarize, the moral precepts in Vipassanā exist to delineate the fundamental requirements for walking on the path of health. They exist because breaking them makes walking on that path more difficult, which I can confirm at least to the extent of my own practice. They do not define a finite law which is either broken or not broken, but define the spectrum of variables which directly and immediately influence our living experience. I believe that this precise and pragmatic approach to these precepts is the reason that most ethical codes and the morals of most world religions revolve around such similar central themes.

Conclusion

I think it's important to ask myself how this looks in work and life. Will I fall into the trap of backbiting in clinical practice? Will I ally with a complaining client to triangulate and vilify their relations in the name of "building rapport"? Or will I be able to sit in the shit soup of my own insecurity in order to allow them to do the same? What will happen if sexual desire arises in me or in my client? Will I be able to envision the long-term effects of corrupting the transference and hold the line to process the complex through my meditation practice? Or will I just deny it on the surface while leaving it unresolved and festering in my deepest paleomammalian mind? Will I use alcohol or coffee or even sugar to rid myself of the anxiety, depression, and grief of my clients, or will I bake those feelings in the furnace of Vipassanā practice that very night to be digested and metabolized forever? These rhetorical questions define the moment-to-moment practice that I hold in mind every day, both in and out of a professional context. Through these questions, an ethical code for vocation and avocation flows together as one.

As outlined in the three phases of Vipassanā meditation, morality is the foundation upon which my success as a human being stands. Like a seed gives birth to a tree, which gives birth to

many seeds, which gives birth to more trees and even more seeds, the fruits of my own morality

are multiplied throughout the non-linear equation that defines the search for peace and harmony

among others. Without morality the search is pointless. But with a strong moral foundation and

the desire to work diligently, an ethical code simply arises from the shit soup like a lotus from

the pond.

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Appendix A

Sex In Vipassanā

One requirement for admission into the longer 20 and 30-day Vipassanā retreats is that for the full year prior to the retreat, an applicant is either in a committed monogamous relationship or are completely abstinent (including masturbation) and also abstains from taking any intoxicants. These requirements exist because it has been found through the centuries that these activities create a subtle agitation in a person's mind powerful enough to make it impossible to work seriously in isolation all day and night for the full length of the retreat. Because of the isolation and sheer length of these retreats, meditators are working through such deep complexes that they become psychologically fragile until the work is complete. Just like a surgeon sterilizing an operation of the body, their working environment must be pristine enough to perform this delicate operation of the mind. Does this directly define a particular ethical standard for me? No, but just like any scientific study, these empirically-based requirements suggest something about the effects of certain behaviors that inform the questions that I ask myself about the choices I make in my daily life.

Appendix B

Triangulation in Politics, The Good and The Bad

In other news, we are currently living in a country that is politically polarized, and as I read the

news I am constantly reminded of the importance of thoughtful speech in everything we do. I

admit that I participate in this political polarization in the sense that I land firmly on the left in

nearly every national issue today. However, the way in which these issues are communicated

publicly by all sides is a frequent cause of *the nausea*. Just this morning I read stories in the news

about the Left trouncing the right for stricter gun control, the Right calling the Black Lives

Matter movement "anti-american," and a not atypical email to the CIIS student email listserv

describing American police as aligned with "White Supremacy."

Now, by engaging in these topics I realize that I am about to enter into very, very delicate

territory. I ask the reader to engage an extra level of awareness of the subtly of what I am about

to say in order to avoid splitting my statements into black and white stands on these issues, even

if I fail to find the perfect words to describe myself.

The way in which all sides communicate these issues gives me nausea. *Just to repeat:*

regardless of content, the process in which each side expresses their message bothers me. The

triangulation in the back and forth between these political sides looks just like a family or group

conflict where each member has opinions, and each are communicated just poorly enough to

increase the likelihood of the other side feeling victimized and encourage subsequent and

similarly poor responses. I'll take these current issues as examples of cases where my framework

is particularly applicable.

When the political Left calls for stricter gun control, they do so without tactfully acknowledging the small kernel of plausibility that the political Right expresses about the factors influencing domestic gun violence like mental health and religious radicalism. Instead, the Left simply *pushes back* with calls for gun control. *To be clear:* I strongly support gun control and am of the opinion that the Right's arguments don't hold much water. But we are one big American family that has to live with each other in this house, and ignoring the other side's points to *push* gun control through is an act of political violence. It only feeds their unconscious drive to amplify the slightest flaw in the message. Of course there are good people breaking this down correctly, like President Obama publicly recognizing that there are many factors leading to gun violence. Trevor Noah also recently made the statement that it's possible to be both against terrorism and gun control. These ideas are intelligent, and swift. But regardless on my stance on the content, this process of ignoring the Right's message by just *pushing harder* on gun control leaves the Right feeling unheard, and opens the door for even more unconscious amplification of this one small weakness in the Left's argument. This slows the process of passing real, intelligent gun control legislation as well as addressing those other factors that lead to gun violence America. This feedback cycle continues until it gets so bad that one or both sides are forced to see through the real source of their misery; that they are both psychologically splitting the issues at hand, and failing to hear, acknowledge, and intelligently debunk the other side's opinions by

simply stating the facts. It is this regressive process of splitting between "our side" or "your side"

that transforms a conflict into an unsolvable conflict, regardless of the issues involved.[9]

The same process occurs when the far Right reacts to the Black Lives Matter movement

with increased nationalistic clinging to the "Real America" that they claim the BLM movement

is trying to "destroy." These illogical statements are of course crude and unwarranted, as even the

most superficial inquiry into the source of the BLM movement will reveal that this is not their

fundamental aim. But it is also possible to see these statements as an unconscious emotional

reaction to the BLM movement's extremely small slips in wording or expression of unconscious

anger. *To be clear:* this anger is understandable, and it is an anger that I share. But I also argue

that anger is never productive in the long-term and we should do everything in our power not to

let it contaminate our otherwise valiant efforts to change the system in an intelligent way. That is,

while I imagine that racists will always look for chances to make destructive claims like those

above, movements like the BLM can greatly decrease the opportunities for their opponents to

make such crude remarks by sticking to a strict moral code of avoiding triangulation and sticking

to the facts. Is this ideal of perfection ever possible? I don't think so, but it does give us a guide

for how to strive. If we don't know the guide, these pathological feedback loops will continue

forever until we do.

I believe this was the real gift that Martin Luther King gave his movement, that violence

in all it's forms (i.e. triangulation, anger) is senseless and unproductive, and we truly have to love

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[9] This is where Bowen Theory's concept of the *societal emotional process* could be applied, indicating that similar emotional patterns of regression and splitting occur in the psyche, family, and society. In the case of society, this results in the kind of *societal regression* we saw in the sixties, and that we are beginning to see today.

each other by *understanding* each other in order to make real, lasting progress. It is this gift that

has made MLK the Saint of America. After all, who is remembered more? MLK, who upheld his

ethical commitment to the end, or the incredibly talented spirit in Stockily Carmichael, who also

suffered greatly for his cause but attempted to lead the Civil Rights Movement after MLK's

death by stating: "We tried non-violence and look where it got us. Now it's time to fight[10]."

It's the same story with this morning's email to the CIIS student email listerv. This email

urged that we collectively shift our perspective into "not needing the police" and offered a well-

organized template for ways to approach difficult social situations by self-policing in order to

decrease the possibility of police violence. It contained the profound and wonderful message that

we can actually change this deeply flawed system by changing ourselves. In fact, this is the key

concept in system theory that facilitates change: that we are connected to and affected by the

system, but through that same connection we can *change* the system. After all, *we are the system.*

In fact, I think it the most important message that the world needs today.

However unfortunately, the email also contained a tendency to internally split the image

of the police as all good or all bad with searing passages like "The police exist to protect white

people and respond to white fear. That is their core function." These relatively small but fatal

statements undermine the precious potency of the author's larger vision. And similarly, the

message is so potent that we don't notice the subliminal damage that these small flaws do to the

reader's comprehension of the intended message, and the triangulation and anger that this can

create. The potency of this message is so precious, and it is so fragile. I argue that as just in the

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[10] I don't remember and can not find the exact quote, but this sentence captures the essence of his
statement.

case of the issue of gun control, these seemingly inane flaws are exactly the sentiments that open the door for the opposition to amplify them, and amplify them to large effect. These mistakes give the very racism they are trying to fight more fuel to burn on, and on. Thus, it is this same amplification by *both* sides that has the potential to keep these issues alive and well despite anyone's best efforts, and so many precious lives, to stop them.

Everyone makes the mistakes described above, including myself. There are of course also so many more good messages being sent around these issues, and so many people not fighting ignorance with ignorance, or anger with anger. After all, taking a stand and having our voices heard is the most important part of the process of change. But avoiding triangulation is not yet embedded as a principle in our culture, and the more it surfaces the more it obscures our tears and crying voices. The more seriously I practice Vipassanā, the more foresight I develop and the more vivid the repercussions of these mistakes become to me. Thus, the more intense the nausea becomes and the more I am compelled to engage and change the systems of the world. The truth that this nausea speaks to me is the bedrock of my moral commitment to myself and others that underpins my personal ethical framework.