Self-Betrayal and Moral Repair: A Philosophical Counselor's Case Study

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Abstract
This paper begins with a case study recounted from my philosophical counseling practice. The case of "Eddy" serves to open questions that are elaborated in this essay: the philosophical and clinical meanings of moral injury, and whether self-betrayal is a significant harm that falls under the sorts of psychological and normative suffering implied by the concept of moral injury. My review of recent philosophical and clinical literature on moral injury shows that it is typically described as a syndrome resulting from one's experience of moral betrayal within the context of trust in institutionally-respected authorities; authorities that lead one to actions that compromise one's own values while fulfilling one's institutionally-mandated duties. I argue that this described syndrome falls short of capturing the problem of voluntary complicity such as in the case of Eddy. My claim is clarified by my review of other experiential examples of complicity found in the philosophical literature. I explain that the process notion of normative-ideal agentic identification is helpful to understand the agentic state of some people, such as Eddy, who voluntarily elect to comply in harmful institutional or social situations. I develop the notion of qualitative complicity, which captures the syndrome of normative self-betrayal that occurs in such cases. I conclude that efforts to recover moral integrity in such cases necessitate gestures of reparation by morally-injured agents toward the moral community with whom they identify; moral communities that are betrayed by their voluntary complicity.

Keywords: Moral Injury, Moral Repair, Philosophical Counseling, Self-Betrayal, Complicity

Introduction

I am, by training, a philosopher and a philosophical counselor. My philosophical counseling practice is an educational activity that offers my clients a wide spectrum of philosophical approaches to assist them in understanding and coping with their significant life issues. (Mehuron, 2011) My current research focuses on interdisciplinary approaches to moral injury and moral repair. This presentation draws on one of my client's experiences of moral repair and moral injury, in support of developing my thesis on the role of self-betrayal in some people's experiences of moral injury.

Philosophical counseling can introduce and cultivate existential ways of seeing and analyzing one's complicities, typically called "bad faith" by existentialist Jean Paul Sartre. (Sartre, 1993) With philosophical counseling, we can become conscious of our choices, enlarge our apprehension of how our way of life is constituted by unquestioned norms, and begin to renounce those that do not serve our notion of the good. We can carve out the meaningfulness of our lives by choosing life projects and ideals that contribute to our notion of the personal and collective good. Incrementally, one can disentangle some of one's contributions to harmful practices, developing stronger ideal agentic identifications that lend integrity to our character (Kamler, 1994). Moral failures and moral remainders (Norlock, 2009) along the way are recast by existential self-appraisal as part of a person's life projects that are capable of taking account of and correcting lapses in one's normative agency. I will develop some of these ideas in this presentation.

I want to start by examining a particular type of existential and normative failure that seems to be a ubiquitous part of ordinary experience: normative self-betrayal. A certain philosophical counseling client, whom I call by the fictional name "Eddy", implied this type of failure in our conversations. In counseling him, I thought I could introduce the idea of moral injury as an interpretive possibility, to help us both to think about his issues. But I found that the concept of moral injury was not an easy fit for suggesting to Eddy that he might be betraying his own values. This paper works out why that is so. In the end, I find that the concept of moral injury should be expanded to elucidate normative self-betrayal as a particular type of normative self-harm, serving as a useful interpretive framework to introduce to some clients. Normative self-betrayal understood as a type of moral injury can evaluate and replace the traditional existential notion of bad faith, although I cannot develop that argument in this paper.

Eddy's case

I begin with my client Eddy's story. Any possible identifiers of my client are anonymized or fabricated to protect his privacy and the confidentiality of our conversations. This case is not an objective description. I am skeptical about the "objectivity" of counseling case descriptions, due to the necessary confabulation intrinsic to telling a "case." I have presented this argument elsewhere (Mehuron, 2009), only to note here that I think giving a case as a form of storytelling *is* valuable for counseling practitioners. Cases understood as stories are open to clinical and philosophical interpretation and evaluation, which usefully invites counselors to meta-reflection. Here, I weave my own philosophical reflections and assertions into this case. I prefer that readers understand that my story of Eddy's case is retrospective and self-reflective, in pursuit of the philosophical problem opened by our conversations. Eddy's case offers an interpretive template for being able to *see* normative self-betrayal in

other contexts, and engaging in the practical pursuit of the reparative value of self-forgiveness and other forms of moral reparation that are relevant to normative self-betrayal.

He told me that he earned a great deal of money as a corporate consultant and that he was very good at what he did. He did not enjoy the work much. But he enjoyed what the money provided him. He said that he traveled widely, and was able to afford any pleasure he wanted. This included the paid-for sexual company of women. In retrospect, it is apparent that Eddy masked his identity to me in some significant ways. He wanted to use phone calls, he didn't share his full name, and he didn't give specific names to any people or organizations with whom he was involved.

My discomfort with the way he glossed over his sexual practices stemmed from the issue of power: how men with considerable socioeconomic privilege may exploit women as sexual commodities. Exploitive agents, availed with the "mask" of socioeconomic power, are not typically disclosive of their culpability in their sexual exploitation of more vulnerable people: women, girls, and boys. More specifically, agents who are complicit in harm to others can mask their violations by omission, downplaying the suffering they cause, or ignoring the structural situation of oppression that enables their harmful actions. (Aragon and Jaggar, 2018) But I didn't know whether Eddy participated in this sort of exploitation, or whether his adventures simply involved consensual sex with women whose socioeconomic status approximated his own. Our conversations did not reach below the surface of his own conflicts regarding sexual intimacy in general, or his sadness about his loss of sexual intimacy with one very significant woman in his life.

Eddy said his corporate, libertarian sexual lifestyle bothered him. He contrasted his lifestyle to his recent past. He had once been very involved in a more community-based activity, supporting the city's music startups after the city's bankruptcy and subsequent revitalization. He loved music and musicians and wished he could have played a bigger part in supporting the city's music scene. He experienced deep disillusionment with the community-based, philanthropic initiative he'd been supporting because he saw dishonesty, hypocrisy, and corruption take over. He chose to leave it and use his consultant skills in an openly exploitative, capitalist venture that he found more tolerable than the hypocrisy of the community-based organization. But in the aftermath of this choice, he was struggling with feelings of meaninglessness and purposelessness. He was feeling less energetic, more apathetic, and more isolated from people whom he respected and from the music scene that he once loved and supported.

At this point, I introduced the idea of moral injury. I hoped that this concept might clarify his feelings of disillusionment with the hypocrisies of the community-based music associations in his recent past. Experienced as a type of moral betrayal, we might be able to make sense of the harm to his own values, and reflect on his reactions to this harm. At that time, I did not have sources at hand that specifically articulate the relation between normative self-betrayal and moral injury. However, I felt that his agentic role in his moral compromises was important to consider and that we might both learn from our conversations if he chose to examine it.

We talked about his libertarian sexual practices, and how this might affect other values he held dear. For example, I asked him to consider whether the more he sought to gratify his desires and to use his wealth to do so, there might be diminishing returns for both sexual fulfillment, his need for intimacy, and his desire for meaningful social engagement. But he

did not want to consider any other normative self-regulation of his activities or his professional choices. I was concerned that he was following a trajectory of compromise with his own values, unreflectively enacting degrees of normative self-harm on himself, and possibly on others. I struggled with how to introduce this problem without moralistic undertones that might feel judgmental to him. I tried to do so, with a focus on self-care and self-reflection as philosophical tools that might help him gain more self-understanding. I suggested that we take a look at the value conflicts in his life that, unaddressed, seemed to be leading to self-alienation. So, I pointed out the nihilistic aspect of his insistence on the meaninglessness of capitalism, his own work, and others' efforts to repair the world. He considered this and agreed to look more closely at this philosophical tendency in his life; its antecedents and where it was taking him. We talked about existentialist challenges to nihilism such as taking responsibility for our own life projects and conscious awareness of how our choices create meaning in our lives.

Shortly after we began talking about his nihilist attitude, self-alienation, and possible normative self-harm, he informed me that he was seeing a psychiatrist who diagnosed him with depression and put him on anti-depressants. Then Eddy ended his sessions with me.

Eddy's story opened for me the philosophical problem of the harm implicated by normative self-betrayal. I was left with the question of how I could have advocated on his behalf for his self-care. I think this exploration may have been daunting to him; perhaps we lacked a more secure basis of trust for this dialogue. The existential framework that was introduced to him may have seemed to him to be a harsh verdict on his situation and he may have felt like he didn't have enough energy or internal resources to sort it out. My development in this paper of self-betrayal as a quality of moral injury is my alternate account of what Eddy and I could have examined, had our sessions continued.

A comparative review of early clinical accounts of moral injury based on war veterans' experiences, and a philosophical account of moral repair will be useful to begin to analyze the problem of harm implicated by normative self-betrayal. To this comparison, I now turn.

Moral injury and moral repair

"Moral injury" as a possible psychotherapeutic diagnostic category was coined by psychologist Jonathan Shay, in his clinical work with war veterans' struggle with post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD). (Shay, 2014) Shay contrasts veterans' PTSD symptomatology with the symptoms of moral injury. Conceptions of PTSD, he claimed, miss the etiological structures of moral injury. He argues that in the etiology of PTSD, the role of the veteran may be as a victim or witness to overwhelming events of atrocity or violence. In this schema, the necessary aspect of well-being that they have lost is the basic feeling of safety. The etiology of PTSD lies in violent triggering events of actual or threatened death or serious injury, with subsequent symptoms of avoidance or numbing, physiological arousals of flight from danger, and painful emotions of fear, horror, and helplessness. Shay found that veterans are often burdened not only by PTSD but also by a parallel etiological structure, the triggering event of which are acts that violate their deeply held moral values. In wartime events of atrocity or violence, the role of the veteran may be as perpetrator, victim, or witness.

In such a context, the veteran can experience all or some of the foregoing symptoms, *and more.* Should veterans have a role in acts that violate their moral values, they may, in

addition, experience the morally-oriented emotions of guilt, shame, and anger. They may have lost the basic attitude of trust that is necessary for their commitment to the military. Shay writes that when social trust is destroyed, it is replaced by settled expectancies of harm, exploitation, and humiliation from others. Taking into account subsequent clinical iterations of moral injury's etiology (Litz et. al., 2009), Shay defines the parameters of moral injury for an individual who is implicated either as a victim, witness, or perpetrator: a betrayal of what is right, by someone who holds legitimate authority, in a high-stakes situation. The "who" of the violator may be the self or can be a powerholder to whom the self is in some way subordinate. Regardless of what form of moral injury is in play, Shay emphasizes that the question of trust is on the table. Social solidarity is destroyed by the violations inflicted by leadership's moral betrayal of trustworthiness, or by the individual's moral self-betrayal. Subsequent social isolation and self-alienation require remedies hinge on social support and recognition.

In the current psychotherapeutic clinical literature, there is debate as to whether moral injury should become a "diagnosis" in the clinical sense. On the one hand, moral injury is not currently a syndrome named by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (DSM), although given the wide net thrown by DSM iterations, it could well be captured in future editions. The DSM, now in its fifth edition, has a long record of constructing "syndromes" of mental disease, even if such a disease does not have a medicalized etiology. (Mehuron, 2015) On the other hand, there is a philosophical tradition of philosophical diagnosis in the western canon. The most obvious references are Martha Nussbaum's book *The Therapy of Desire* (Nussbaum, 1994), and Michel Foucault's four-volume treatise *The History of Sexuality*. (Foucault, 1978-1986) Both document that philosophies of life since Hellenic times offer philosophical diagnoses that enhance the care of the self and well-being (*eudaimonia*). This philosophical tradition squarely looks at normative disease as a source of suffering with its own symptomatology with remedies found, for example, in Stoicism, Aristotelian virtue ethics, or Existentialism. Although there seems to be a clinical consensus that moral injury, unlike PTSD, cannot and should not be conceptualized as a *medicalized* syndrome, psychotherapeutic remedies or treatment regimens are obvious in the psychotherapeutic literature. For example, Litz et. al. call for intervention strategies to provide the sort of support and recognition that afflicted veterans may need.

These strategies target veterans who are morally injured in the sense of having participated as the perpetrators of violence on morally relevant noncombatants in war such as children, women, or other people whose suffering is incurred as collateral damage by the wartime atrocity. In such cases, Litz et. al. describes sessions intended to foster the veterans' reparation for the harms they perpetrated, re-engagement in and reconnection with public life. The list of techniques of moral repair is long and items are mutually inclusive. Notably, these techniques are *not* clinical, i.e., medical, but rather psychotherapeutic and philosophically based. These are: 1) Socratic questioning challenges service members to think of alternative perspectives and ways of construing the implications of the moral violation; 2) preparation and education about moral injury and its impact, along with making plans for promoting change; 3) emotion-focused disclosure of events surrounding the moral injury; 4) directive, formative examination of the implication of the experience for the veteran in terms of self-understanding; 5) imaginative dialogue with an imagined benevolent moral authority about what happened, its effects, and impact on future plans; 6) fostering reparation and self-forgiveness; 7) fostering reconnection with communities; 8) assessment of values and goals moving forward. (Litz et. al., 702-704) These types of interventions are systematized in the psychotherapeutic approach Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) which includes

choosing personal values and commitment to live in accord with chosen values, in contrast to avoiding distress or adhering to other people's expectations.

We can see, from these clinical accounts, that there is a role for philosophical counselors who can recognize normative violations as real harms to individuals and to their communities of social solidarity, in support of people who seek moral repair. The moral repair techniques that are only recently featured in psychotherapeutic discourses are present as deep themes of analysis in the twentieth and twenty-first-century Western philosophical canon. One example is philosopher Margaret Urban Walker's book, *Moral Repair: Reconstructing Moral Relations After Wrongdoing*. (Walker, 2006) Her work is a sustained analysis of how philosophical and humanities-based theorists have interpreted the process of moving from situations of moral loss and damage to situations where some degree of stability in moral relations is regained (Walker, 7). The scope of Walker's analysis exceeds considerations of veterans' wartime scenarios, and is applicable to scenarios of wrongdoing that range from interpersonal violations of trust to violations of trust and solidarity such as human-rights violations, on a global scale. She argues that no matter the contextual scale of the event, moral repair is restoring or creating trust and hope in a shared sense of value and responsibility. Walker's normative tasks provides substantial content to the therapeutic interventions listed by Litz et. al.

These normative tasks can be summarized as the process of rebuilding trust by the accurate placement of responsibility on wrongdoers and their accomplices, authoritative reinstatement of community norms and practices that have been violated, nourishing hope by reestablishing the worthiness of those to be trusted, and stabilizing the moral relationships among members of the moral community. (Walker, 28) But Walker's analysis does not entertain how these normative tasks could be therapeutically applied, nor does she consider the moral problem of normative self-betrayal. Her analysis resolutely focuses on self-other relational contexts, bracketing as irrelevant to her project either the subjective self-relationship or the dyadic counseling relationship as constitutive parts of relational moral repair. Walker's discussion does not lead to any specific interpretation of self-forgiveness, or more specifically in cases of self-betrayal. Unlike Walker, Litz et. al. has made explicit the phenomenon of normative self-betrayal as a subspecies of moral injury that cries for moral repair, although they do not call it by this name. To understand the place of normative self-betrayal as a subspecies of moral injury, I argue that tacit assumptions regarding the normative structure of character and personal integrity should be explicitly proposed as necessary elements of normative self-betrayal. These elements require the agent's reflective scrutiny in the event of self-betrayal. Next, I will develop a framework for thinking of moral injury as a damaged state of self as well as an intersubjective quality that is part of a person's agentic engagement in their social context.

Character and agentic identification

Here I review two accounts, clinical and philosophical, that emphasize the personal development of stable character traits that constitute the normative identity of the self. Both are concerned with the etiology of crises of character and thus of personal identity that may need moral repair. I find that the clinical account omits the use of the term "moral repair" to describe its treatment strategies, and the philosophical account omits the use of the term "moral injury" to describe the kind of normative harm done. It is not the aim of this paper to consider why there is this disciplinary discursive gap, but perhaps this discussion can

instigate the consideration of "Why not use this term?" on either side of this disciplinary divide.

Clinical psychology researchers Atuel et.al. advance what they call a "multidisciplinary," but what I would call "philosophical" understanding, that encompasses moral injury as the failure to adhere to a virtue or normative standard as prescribed by a group or institution, unethical marks on a person's character, and experience of identity negotiation between the real self and the undesired self. (Atuel et. al., 2021). They advance an Aristotelian character framework that provides a broader theoretical foundation for moral injury than those accounts focused on moral failure in the context of military experience. Atuel et. al. distinguishes moral injury as harm to one's character and identity that results from a person's "moral failure event." It is an "undoing of character" with psychological repercussions of shame, regret, humiliation, guilt, or anger. This character framework agrees with Shay and Litz, et. al. to distinguish moral injury from PTSD, its medicalized lexicon, and treatment techniques. The authors hope to focus on the continuous, reflexive consciousness of the self as engaged in the acquisition of and consistency of one's virtues and corresponding character traits. Although Atuel et. al. do not use the philosophical term "moral repair," they recommend promising therapeutic interventions such as compassion-focused dialogue, responsibility charts, and other means of self-forgiveness and atonement.

Ontologically and phenomenologically prior to self-betrayal, there must be a person with character integrity constituted by her voluntary and habitual adherence to normative standards. Character integrity is what is violated by normative self-betrayal. This is my insight inspired by philosopher Howard Kamler in his book, *Identification and Character: A Book on Psychological Development*. (Kamler,1994) Although Kamler does not specifically call this type of failure "moral injury" or "self-betrayal," his intent is to spell out how the psychological developmental processes of identification with ideals are essential to the fulfillment of two existential directives that are universal to human life. The first directive is that one pursues self-states that characterize one's uniqueness as an autonomous agentic personal character; the second is that one pursues self-states that characterize one's commonality as an autonomous agentic social character. Drawing on both Aristotle's account of virtue acquisition and Sartre's account of existential meaning, Kamler emphasizes that genuine identification with character traits modeled by external others, is a developmental process of trial and error, ultimately resulting in meaning derived from living with character values that have been chosen by the self, rather than by values indoctrinated by the public world or by familial context. In this regard, Kamler writes that maintaining the integrity of life projects that express one's valuative character is tantamount to maintaining one's existence as an identificatory agentic self. He argues that inconsistency about either personal or social character identity can usher in depression, guilt, shame, humiliation, and social isolation and feelings of abandonment.

The notion of the agentic identificatory self is encumbered by western individualist assumptions about the nature of the self. Although Kamler's two existential directives provide a way of thinking about the self in its dual identities as public and personal, I want to introduce the idea of complicity in order to locate this analysis of normative self-betrayal within the relational field of intersubjective experience.

Complicity

Complicity, often unintentional, in harmful collective practices, is something most of us do. We are all implicated in particular institutional structures where we may simultaneously or episodically be victims, perpetrators, or witnesses. As psychotherapist Natasha Distiller notes, we are social beings with personal agency and public agency, continuously embedded in a cultural world of shared practices and attitudes that inscribe our individuality with collective character traits. (Distiller, 2022). I call this *ontological* complicity: states of being that are well-described by psychotherapeutic descriptions of intersubjective being in the world that are heavily influenced by phenomenological and hermeneutic philosophy (Askay and Farquhar, 2006) Existentialists, in particular, wrestle with how this ontological dimension can include unintentional complicity that is simultaneously a moral realm of individual responsibility. To existentialists, the ethical dimension is embedded in ontological complicity. We are dynamically involved by virtue of our individual, normative agency. We make choices all the time, despite perhaps feelings of helplessness within the sway of cultural givens. The existential task is agentic self-creation, inclusive of our normative identity (Beauvoir, 1948).

Complicity is more than ontological embeddedness in intersubjective public life. The concept of complicity, especially the degree and kind of agentic responsibility attached to various dimensions of complicity is extensively parsed by Lepora and Goodin in their book *On Complicity and Compromise.* (Lepora and Goodin, 2013)Their analysis of agentic responsibility measures the accountability of wrongdoers and others who are placed at specifiable degrees of causal distance to the wrongdoing perpetrated by primary wrongdoers. Like Walker's account, the relational context, and the nexus of moral causation are the focus of their analysis.

Although the analysis by Lepora and Goodin is valuable for ascertaining causal degrees of agentic culpability in wrongdoing, it does not capture the "felt" dimension of wrongness: the phenomenology of being-the-perpetrator-witness-bystander. With normative self-betrayal, there is no *causal* distance between the wrongdoer's act and the injury to his identificatory agential self. This "felt" dimension, a suffered realm of moral self-betrayal, may be inchoate for agents themselves in the absence of self-knowledge or by the suppressed pain of loss of one's self-integrity. Philosopher Kathryn Norlock, in *Forgiveness from a Feminist Perspective*, argues that controllable forms of self-harm may be moral harm when our practices demean us, damage our capacities, or limit the opportunities of our future selves. (Norlock, 2009) Embedded in ontological complicity, our choices may require compromise even to the extent of damaging our self-respect and self-worth. Loss of integrity can spiral the identificatory agential self into deeper neglect of responsibilities, moral ideals, and attitudes of hope and trust. The identificatory agential self may have only an inchoate sense of his *in*sufferable wrongness or unforgivable self-status. Norlock notes that in order to overcome this self-alienation, a third-party perspective on one's wrongdoing to one's self, by imaginative, self-reflective, narrative, or conversational means of access, may be necessary.

In any case, to achieve a level of moral repair for self-betrayal, one needs to see oneself as both agent and victim of one's own moral failure, to most accurately gauge one's culpability. The distances remarked in the analysis of self-betrayal are *qualitative*. In other words, the distances between one's past, present, and future normative selves are matters of degree measured by the valuative costs of one's choices to one's moral integrity within the lifespan of one's existential directives.

My analysis of self-betrayal identifies *qualities of complicity* that mark the uniqueness of such cases of moral injury. With the interpretative framework of *qualitative* complicity, the philosophical and clinical literature on moral injury and repair can explicitly include cases of self-betrayal. *Qualitative complicity*, understood within a framework of moral injury, is a valuable tool of philosophical counseling practice.

Eddy's moral repair

Eddy's qualitative complicity illustrates the uniquely difficult effort needed for his moral repair. Normative self-betrayal is simultaneously a betrayal of an ideal normative community with whom one identifies *and* a betrayal of one's authentic self. Efforts to recover moral integrity are tied up with the need to provide reparations toward the moral community; a community that has primacy in the constitution of one's chosen ideal agentic identity. In Eddy's case, this community has been collectively harmed by the abandonment of his support for its musicians. But also harmed are the relationships afforded by the community's constitutive role in his intersubjective life. Moral repair involves reparative gestures on his part that can imagine that community as the third person, the benevolent perspective from whom he seeks forgiveness and hope while rebuilding trust. By integrating this benevolent perspective and shining this perspective on his moral failure, he can begin to hope to reclaim lost remnants of character integrity aligned with his most highly valued, meaningful existential directives.

Conclusion

Harm to our ideal agentic identifications is a form of moral injury. When people like Eddy choose to suppress or deny the ideals most meaningful to them and which they have worked hard to integrate, they are violating their existential life directions. This violation is not only normative, it is felt on emotional, psychological, cognitive, and perhaps even physical registers. Although our ideal agentic identifications are challenged by moral luck, bad actors, and the like, such challenges are not self-inflicted. So normative self-betrayal is an exceptional quality of moral injury that demands a qualitative analysis of the suffering inflicted, and an accurate assessment of the agent's culpability for his loss of integrity.

Integrity is built over time by consistency in living and choosing one's ideal character traits, standing by those chosen traits in the modes of habit-building and resolution. Existential bad faith can be understood as episodes of trial and error in the ambiguous life construction of one's authentic self and commitments (Beauvoir 23). Bad faith, under this understanding, is only resolvable by integrity secured by the pursuit and ownership of ideal agentic character traits.

Normative self-betrayal is the violation of one's adult, conscious and integrated identificatory choices and acquired character traits. We can distinguish from it, inconstancy toward one's integrity that may be the result of derailment from unconscious causal mechanisms that persist from childhood. Another distinction is one's developmental confusion expressed in imaginative resolutions to inauthentic identificatory attachments. Acts of normative self-betrayal vacate one's accountability not only to one's own integrity but to one's chosen valued communities with whom one identifies as a public self. Self-betrayal wounds the ontological familiarity of one's life context and phenomenological feelings of integrity. As it did for Eddy, it can expose one to alienation, purposelessness, and vulnerability to social ideologies that derail one's carefully-wrought ideal self. The imagined third-person

perspective of one's community is needed in order to perceive and rebuild ownership of one's lost remnants of character integrity. So, part of the moral repair of normative self-betrayal necessitates reparative gestures on the agent's part that imagine that community as the third person benevolent perspective from whom one seeks forgiveness, rebuilds social trust, and inspires hope.

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