“He Doesn’t Think He’s Lying”: The Moral Significance of Donald J. Trump’s Linguistic Practices

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Received: 3 November 2020 / Accepted: 13 November 2020 / Published online: 26 November 2020
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Abstract

Synthesizing the metaethical aspects of George Lakoff’s conception of Strict Father Morality (SFM) and Divine Command Theory (DCT) helps us to have a better understanding of the Trump phenomenon, US President Trump regularly deviating from accepted facts and his supporters having no problem with this practice. We misunderstand the situation if we presume that Trump’s mendacity and his supporters’ credulity fully account for this situation. More specifically, I argue that the authoritarian thread that runs through SFM/DCT provides Trump with the justification, in his view as well as in the eyes of his supporters, to dictate the meaning of key concepts, for example, truth, fairness, and justice. As a result, when Trump says something that seems plainly false, I argue that we better understand the situation if we regard Trump as taking himself to be defining what the term in question means. This situation has far-reaching ramifications, from destabilizing the meaning of key moral terms to all issues becoming partisan issues to the loss of expertise.

Keywords Moral schemas · Moral theory · Divine Command Theory · Metaethics · US politics

The above quote, from former top White House aide Kellyanne Conway, aptly sets the stage for an examination of current political discourse in the USA. As we near the completion of Donald J. Trump’s (first) term as US President, this is an appropriate time to take stock of a central ethical aspect of what I will call the “Trump phenomenon.” Through an analysis of his linguistic practices, this paper will illuminate this phenomenon, showing how defenses of his tenuous relationship to truthfulness shed light on the moral worldview of Trump and his supporters. An enduring

Kellyanne Conway, one of Trump’s chief advisors at the time, said this in an interview with CNN (Sinclair 2017). Further analysis of this statement will be provided later in the paper.

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concern for many has been the at best casual relationship to truth and facts Trump demonstrates. At least as concerning has been the standard (or lack thereof) for truthfulness to which his supporters hold him. Trump's critics, thinking they have caught him red-handed in an obvious falsehood, continue to be flabbergasted and dismayed by how his supporters either seem not to care or find a way to construe the alleged falsehood as somehow being true. Calling attention to Trump's inclination for mendacity, though, miscasts what I argue is the more fundamental issue. Trump and his supporters, I suggest, do not take him to be doing anything wrong, e.g., lying. I will argue that this "Trump phenomenon," Trump's relationship with truth and his supporters' willingness to believe him in the face of seemingly overwhelming counter-vailing evidence, can be illuminated by understanding it in the light of moral theory. The moral schemas described by cognitive linguist George Lakoff, in conjunction with Divine Command Theory (DCT), which concerns, *inter alia*, the meaning of moral terms, will help us to better understand political discourse in the Trump era. By applying the metaethical implications of Lakoff's work on moral schemas and drawing from DCT, this paper will illuminate the phenomenon of Trump regularly stating untruths and his supporters not regarding them as such.¹ Additionally, I will consider some ramifications of this Trump phenomenon.

1 Overview of Lakoff on the US Political Spectrum

Synthesizing Lakoff's treatment of the moral worldviews underlying the American political spectrum and the metaethical aspect, i.e., that pertaining to the meaning of moral language, of DCT, illuminates the Trump phenomenon. I begin with an overview of Lakoff's moral schemas which underlie American conservative and progressive worldviews. I will not attempt to flesh out Lakoff's ideas exhaustively; that would not be possible in this space and he does so very well in *Moral Politics*. Rather, my goal in this section is to familiarize readers with the relevant ideas from Lakoff so that they can understand the ways in which I am applying them to my argument.

When I reviewed Lakoff's *Moral Politics*, I had only one unfavorable reaction: I was envious that I had not written the book myself. His schemas for describing the American political spectrum are comprehensive and analytically brilliant; he sheds light on big picture issues and helps us to understand how details fit into the big picture. For example, he demonstrates that conservatives adhere to what he calls *Strict Father Morality* and that progressives adhere to *Nurturant Parent Morality* (Lakoff 2002: 93). These schemas, based on models of literal families, wherein those adhering to Strict Father Morality (SFM) value the authority and protection provided by a

¹ In their recent book, John Dean and Bob Altemeyer make the important point that for authoritarian leaders to be of any consequence, they need authoritarian followers, showing the dynamic relationship between, in this case, Trump and his supporters. That is, authoritarian leaders need followers who also buy into an authoritarian mindset. Dean and Altemeyer focus on the psychological, rather than ethical, significance of this dynamic.

literal strict father and those adhering to Nurturant Parent Morality (NPM) value the nurturance provided by parental figures, have remarkable explanatory power.² These schemas shed light on how conservatives can hold such seemingly disparate positions as belief in small government and that the government should insinuate itself into such intimate considerations as those involving what a woman should do regarding the contents of her uterus. Similarly, Lakoff provides tools to reconcile progressives' emphasis on compassion with their intolerance of, e.g., white supremacists.

Conservative adherence to SFM explains the apparent inconsistency of opposing big government while promoting its involvement regarding a matter so personal as that of a woman's reproductive health. According to SFM, a literal strict father has absolute authority to determine right and wrong as well as the appropriate consequences for those under his charge for having done either. According to the framework entailed by SFM, reward and punishment (such as would be administered by a literal strict father) bring about moral strength. Behaviors that lead to unwanted results, such as an unplanned pregnancy, are due to moral weakness. According to this feature of the SFM worldview, the undesired outcome of unplanned pregnancy would be discouraged by the unavailability of abortions. Also, the unavailability of abortions cultivates moral strength by promoting abstinence which requires self-control. Since, according to SFM, individuals are solely responsible for the outcomes of their actions, if an individual engages in an activity that results in an undesired end (e.g., pregnancy), that individual bears the responsibility for this situation. The availability of abortion undermines the SFM worldview by allowing people to avoid responsibility for the consequences of their behavior. Thus, the only role an appropriately small government should play in this case, according to the SFM worldview, would be to ensure that abortion is unavailable. We see, then, that SFM conservatives are not being hypocritical by believing in small government and opposing abortion. Rather, they are being consistent in their commitment to the ideal that individuals are responsible for the consequences for their actions.

Lakoff also provides the tools to reconcile the seeming tension between NPM emphasis on tolerance while nevertheless being intolerant toward groups that often align themselves with American conservatism. Indeed, a persisting conservative complaint about liberals is that they are hypocritical concerning tolerance. On the one hand, progressives embrace tolerance concerning minorities in terms of race, sexual orientation, gender identity, ethnicity, etc. On the other hand, progressives express intolerance toward those with conservative views, so the charge goes. NPMs value cooperation, empathy, and social connections. These ideals, while they might often entail tolerance, are distinct from tolerance. Tolerance, rather, might be better understood as a means for achieving these ideals. When tolerance for a given group, e.g., white supremacists, does not promote cooperation, empathy, or social connection, then NPMists are acting in conformity to their worldview by not embracing

² Kristin Kobes Du Mez makes a related claim concerning the connection between the role of fatherhood in the family and nation more broadly in her recent book. She writes, "A father's rule in the home is inextricably linked to heroic leadership on the national stage, and the fate of the nation hinges on both (2020: 4).

tolerance for white supremacists. This scenario is precisely what plays out when NPMists counter-protest against white supremacist demonstrations. It is not the case that NPM progressives are inconsistent by being intolerant of, say, neo-Nazis. Rather they are consistently adhering to their value of, e.g., empathy, by repudiating those who reject it.

In addition to illustrating the coherence of the SFM and NPM worldviews, the preceding examples also help to introduce an important contrast between the SFM and NPM worldviews. For the SFM worldview, the causality involved for a woman seeking an abortion is straightforwardly linear: a woman has an unplanned pregnancy; she bears the responsibility for her actions; she should carry the pregnancy to full term. According to a NPM worldview, systemic causality would be employed to make sense of the situation. Imagine that the woman is caught in a cycle of poverty and lacks access to effective birth control. In such a case an unplanned pregnancy could obviously contribute to the cycle of poverty, further impoverishing the mother and bringing the child into impoverished conditions that could likely perpetuate the cycle. Accordingly, the availability of safe, legal abortions coheres with the NPM worldview that we should care for each other and does not cohere with the SFM worldview that individuals bear sole responsibility for themselves. Accordingly, to SFM conservatives, so-called “big government” usurps the authority properly associated with a literal strict father by over-reaching into the lives of families and interfering with what conservatives see as the natural outcomes of one’s actions. For example, since one should enjoy/suffer the consequences of one’s actions, according to SFM, social “safety nets” provided by the government are inappropriate. They interfere with people experiencing the consequences of their actions.

In keeping with the SFM emphasis on linear causality, moral strength is also valued and is similarly straightforward regarding the placement of responsibility on individuals as opposed to treating people within the context of their circumstances. According to the SFM worldview, moral strength is more likely to lead to long-term success than moral weakness, thus those who have achieved success are likely to have done so through moral strength. Accordingly, success implies moral strength making success, by definition, deserved. Those who are legitimately (by SFM standards) at the top, then, deserve their status. For example, in an actual family in which SFM is practiced, the father’s authority is regarded as legitimate and is unquestioned. The role of those supported by the strict father is to uphold the father’s authority. This idea extends metaphorically in a broader, societal context in which the upholding of the SFM system itself is among the highest priorities, reinforcing the idea that the authority of the ultimate authority (be it an actual father, a leader who is regarded as legitimate, or God) is unquestioned.

Drawing from what we have seen regarding SFM and NPM, we see that for both moral schemas, the government is regarded as a metaphorical parent, and the nation is seen as a metaphorical family (Lakoff 2002: 153–154). Conservatives are fundamentally at odds with a liberally oriented government, seeing it as an illegitimate authority, overstepping its bounds. Accordingly, SFMists would be more likely to regard a fellow SFMist president of the USA (POTUS) as a legitimate authority. By contrast, a president who does not embrace SFM ideals would be less likely to be regarded by SFMists as a legitimate authority. Notably, the inverse would not

necessarily hold for NPMists in the case of an SFM POTUS. While NPMists might not be pleased with an SFM POTUS, they would not be as likely to view an SFM presidency as necessarily illegitimate; NPMists who challenge an SFM presidency tend to do so based more on the POTUS's policies and actions. In contrast, SFMists are more likely to see an NPM presidency as illegitimate by its very nature. Consider "birtherism" which challenged the legitimacy not only of the Obama presidency, but also of his US citizenship. Of course, the role race played in that phenomenon cannot be overlooked; however, had Obama been an SFM, conservative Republican, such a challenge would likely not have gained the momentum birtherism in fact did.

2 Overview of Divine Command Theory

Having completed our overview of Lakoff's moral schemas describing the US political landscape, we are ready to introduce the role of Divine Command Theory (DCT) in my argument. Ethics consists of three sub-disciplines: descriptive ethics; metaethics (also known as analytical ethics); and normative ethics. The first is concerned with what in fact are the moral codes of a given community, typically the domain of social science. The third, normative ethics, is concerned with what we ought to do. Metaethics is concerned with the meaning of moral language. Understanding the metaethical significance of DCT will, I argue, shed light on the Trump phenomenon as a manifestation of SFM and DCT. The point is not that all adherents of SFM are DCTists (although I would speculate that many are); rather, DCT provides an established frame of reference to understand the metaethical aspect of SFM.

For advocates of DCT, following God's laws is the essence of morality. In other words, *morally right* means "commanded by God" (Rachels 1999: 55). Plato's *Euthyphro* illustrates the stakes of such an approach to the meaning of moral meaning. If a given act is morally right, is it right because it is loved by the gods or do the gods love it because it is right? For advocates of DCT, that a given act is divinely approved *means* that act is right. The contrasting view would be that the gods love a given act because that act is right. However, such a view runs counter to the authoritarian perspective shared by DCT and SFM in that a given act would be right or wrong independent of what the relevant authority deems to be so. For SFM/DCT, that the relevant authority approves or disapproves of a given act is what makes it right or wrong.

When teaching DCT in my ethics classes, students are able to grasp the normative aspects of DCT with relative ease: What God dictates is what we ought to do. Difficulty arises, though, when it comes to understanding the metaethical component of DCT: the idea God dictates the meaning of ethical concepts. That is, an act is right if God declares it so. There could be no objective, non-divinely determined concept of what is right, otherwise we would no longer be dealing with a theory of ethics wherein God is the ultimate determinant of moral correctness such as is the case with DCT. This idea can be illustrated using a provocative case: Murder is right if God says it is right. That is, by virtue of God's having declared murder to be right, it is thereby right. To use the language of the *Euthyphro*, what would make murder a right act is that it is loved by the gods.

DCT serves a useful purpose in this paper, providing a familiar frame of reference to illustrate the metaethical significance of the Trump phenomenon. However, the idea of divinity is not necessary to my argument, and I want to acknowledge the possibility that not all Trump supporters believe in a divine being. Accordingly, I bring into the discussion Positive Law Theory (PLT), a more secular approach to what counts as warrant from jurisprudence that nevertheless shares the same justification for moral value as DCT. That is, a given act is right if it is posited by the relevant authority. The affinity with SFM is clear: moral rightness consists in doing what the relevant authority figure deems is right. PLT simply underscores that divinity need not be invoked to emphasize the authoritarian tendencies associated with SFM. As suggested above, such an approach to the meaning of moral value is in contrast to an approach which holds that a given act is morally praiseworthy because it is the right thing to do. For DCT/PLT, the moral value of a given act is extrinsic to the act; the moral value is conferred upon it by the relevant authority (as opposed to the act itself being morally valuable). For DCT, murder is wrong because the gods hate it; by way of contrast, for DCT, murder is not intrinsically wrong since, after all, if the gods loved murder, that would make murder right.

Considering PLT as a more secularized version of DCT helps us to see an interesting feature of SFM. Since commands have their warrant by virtue of having been posited by a relevant authority for all three of these approaches to the meaning of moral language, even a secular authority can be seen as divinely sanctioned if that authority is favored by theistic SFMists. Thus, Trump's behavior, often less than pious, is not relevant or disqualifying in the eyes of SFMist Trump supporters since, Trump, as the authority, defines the meaning of what counts as good behavior. Put simply, as the authority, if he does it, it must be right. Trump himself reflects this idea when he projects the attitude that if the president does something, it, by definition, must be legal. Seeing himself as the chief arbiter of legal matters, he cannot obstruct justice, for example, since anything the president does, must, by definition, be just. For those who might be thinking that conservatives typically do not have this same view of the presidency when the office is occupied by a Democrat, it is important to recall that SFMists typically do not regard a liberally oriented government as legitimate.

With these overviews of SFM and DCT in mind, we can see that the affinities between SFM and DCT, especially at the metaethical, analytical level, illuminate much of the current political discourse. If it is not clear already, it will become plain to see that authoritarianism is a common theme between SFM and DCT since for both of these approaches to the meaning of moral language, what constitutes a right moral act is defined by a figure who is regarded as the ultimate authority. This authoritarian strain helps us to understand the Trump administration as well as defenses of it, shedding light, for example, on white evangelical Christians who would normally require pious behavior from their leaders now being willing to give Trump a pass for his transgressions because he supports policies consistent with SFM. They are willing to forgive Trump when his behavior runs afoul of Christian teaching, and when his behavior runs afoul of more worldly norms he need not be forgiven due to his being the relevant authority; if Trump transgresses such norms

then those norms must not be legitimate or relevant. Those who support Trump have deep sympathies to authoritarianism that SFM and DCT help us to understand.

Let us consider this connection between SFM/DCT and authoritarianism from a broader perspective. For the SFM/DCT worldview, the very act of offering a justification for a given belief, policy, or position undermines the authoritarianism associated with this worldview. Correspondingly, being asked, "What justification can be provided for this action?" is taken as an affront. The justification would make, e.g., Trump, beholden to the warrant cited in that the claim in question would only be as good as the reasons provided for it. Such a view of justification is anathema to the conservative SFM/DCT worldview as it would subordinate the authority figure to the reasons provided by that authority figure and for this mindset, the status of the legitimate authority is its own warrant. In other words, for Trump supporters, that Trump said something is good enough for them and the reasons—or lack thereof—for that claim do not matter.

Before elaborating on some of the ramifications of the Trump phenomenon, Trump and his supporters' willingness to believe whatever he says because he says it, often in the face of contradictory evidence, let us recall the central thread of the argument to this point. To be clear, I am not arguing that Trump and his supporters are promoting a narrative that is simply counter to the truth; such an analysis would be insufficiently nuanced. Rather, I am arguing that the metaethical thread shared by SFM and DCT means that whoever is regarded as the legitimate authority determines what counts as truth. For example, even in the face of sufficient evidence warranting the conclusion that the Trump campaign colluded with Russia in the 2016 presidential election, when Trump says that there was "no collusion," he should not be taken to mean that whatever facts there might be concerning the case, they do not align with the charge of collusion. Rather, he should be taken to mean something more along the lines of, "Collusion is considered wrong and I, by definition, cannot do things that are wrong." That is, rather than saying something about facts in the world, Trump should be taken as saying something about the meaning of collusion. And his supporters, by virtue of the authoritarian sympathies associated with their adherence to SFM/DCT, find this manner of reasoning congenial to their worldview. As the metaethical aspects of SFM/DCT suggest, they regard the legitimate authority as perfectly within his rights in defining the meanings of key terms. In a similar vein, when Trump indicates that he cannot obstruct justice because "I'd be obstructing myself," he should be taken to be saying something about the meaning of the term some objective characterization of "obstruction of justice." Again, I argue that we are misunderstanding Trumpism if we take him to be saying something about the facts and whether they align with "obstruction of justice." I suggest that Trump means, and his supporters take him to mean, something more along the lines of dictating what key terms, "obstruction of justice" in this case, shall be taken to mean. We miss the mark when we say, "Trump makes statements that do not align with the facts and thus he is a liar." To be clear, I am not suggesting that Trump is truthful; rather, I am arguing that a more nuanced way of understanding the Trump phenomenon is to realize that he is not merely making utterances that do not align with the facts; rather, when he uses language in a way that seems mendacious, he is best understood as taking himself to be dictating the meaning of that language (as do

his supporters). For example, when Trump suggests that he cannot obstruct justice since, as the president, if he does it, it is legal, he should be taken to be making a definitional claim, not a factual claim that may or may not correspond with what is the case.

When it seems that Trump might be displaying a disregard for facts, I suggest that it is more productive to understand him as dictating the meaning of key terms. For example, when he says he did not obstruct justice in the course of the Mueller investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election or during his impeachment trial when he plainly did by ignoring congressional subpoenas, I argue that it is futile to regard him as lying. Rather, as the legitimate authority by SFM and DCT lights, he is telling us the meaning of “obstruct justice.” For Trump and his supporters, it is impossible for him to obstruct justice since what he does, qua legitimate authority, dictates the meaning of justice.

3 Ramifications

3.1 The Meaning of Truth, Justice and the American Way

Well, truth and justice anyway: The most fundamental ramification of the Trump phenomenon bears on (what many regard as the distortion of) the meaning of language itself. Shedding further light on the metaethical significance of SFM/DCT, what Lakoff calls “contested concepts” provides an application of how one’s moral worldview can shape the definitions one has of key terms. Contested concepts are those that anyone would agree are important: justice, fairness, and honesty are examples. It is noteworthy that even liars regard honesty as being important; they see value in circumventing it. While there is broad consensus that these ideas are central to civil society, they are “contested” due to the broad disagreement concerning the meaning of these terms. This understanding of contested concepts helps to make sense of the seemingly implausible conservative accusation that progressives hate (or do not value) freedom. In other words, even though everyone values freedom as a good, progressives and conservative might not fully accept each other’s definitions of freedom. For example, conservative definitions of freedom would likely include what progressives would regard as overbroad interpretations of the Second Amendment and the ability to practice one’s religion even if doing so comes at the expense of others. Without getting too in depth into the content of what freedom could mean, the point is that while we all might agree that “freedom” is good, SFM/DCT, as a metaethical theory, tells us what freedom means.

Furthermore, since SFM/DCT entails a commitment to what SFMists regard as legitimate authority, deviations from what the legitimate authority says the meaning of “freedom” (or any contested concept) shall be, are, by their very nature, illegitimate. Thus, in the eyes of SFMists, progressives would not value freedom since it is plausible that progressives might not accept the SFM definition of freedom. Part of the attraction of authoritarian ethics is that complex ideas can be defined very simply. Morality is what the legitimate authority, ultimately God, says that it is. Of course, I should note, SFMists would likely reject the idea that the definitions of

these moral terms are contested since, for them, moral terminology means what the relevant authority says that it is that is all that there is to the matter.

"Truth" has become an increasingly contested concept in the Trump era. This phenomenon would make sense given the lack of independent criteria to assess veracity since the relevant authority, Trump in this case, is his own standard of veracity. Moreover, identifying Trump as his own, and only, arbiter of what counts as lying illustrates the metaethical argument I am making: that, according to SFM and DCT, Trump, as the relevant authority is in a position to determine what given moral terms—truth-telling and lying in this case—mean.

We see another example of a contested concept, fairness, get the Trump treatment. That is, when we understand the metaethical significance of the SFM/DCT worldview, we gain a better understanding of the occasions when Trump puts forth an idiosyncratic meaning of a word and his supporters go along with it. When Trump imposed tariffs on China and China responded by imposing tariffs on the US, Trump characterized China's actions as "unfair retaliation" ("Donald Trump Responds" 2020). That an in-kind response could fit the very definition of fairness notwithstanding, Trump (and his supporters) would say that Trump, as the legitimate authority, is telling us what fairness means. In Trump's 2017 interview with Lester Holt, he told us what, to him, fairness means. Holt inquired of Trump whether he had asked then FBI Director James Comey for a pledge of loyalty and Trump replied that he had not. However, Trump added, asking Comey for loyalty would have been legitimate since Trump wanted to know if the FBI investigation into Russia's interference in our 2016 presidential election would treat him fairly (Reuters 2020). Now, of course, Trump fired Comey soon after and much attention has been given to whether in doing so Trump obstructed justice. However, attention has not been given to the metaethical significance of Trump telling us what the crucial moral concept of fairness means. Fairness means loyalty to Trump. Trump reinforced this idea in his 7/19/2017 interview with the *New York Times*, during which he expressed his displeasure with Attorney General Jeff Sessions' having recused himself from investigations into the Trump campaign's connections to Russia. Had Trump known that Sessions would recuse himself, he would have appointed someone else. Sessions' decision to recuse himself was "very unfair," according to Trump ("Trump Interview Transcript" 2017). Following the logic of DCT, it would follow, as suggested above, that fairness is what Trump says that it is. Accordingly, "fairness" in this context, for Trump, would be that the person overseeing the Russia investigations should be someone who is loyal to him, or perhaps, someone who can be controlled by him. Now, consider ordinary understandings of fairness. Should it not be the case that a fair investigation follows the facts where they lead and that such an undertaking would take place regardless of who is overseeing it? Such a scenario seems to capture the essence of fairness. However, to the DCT and SFM mindsets, it would make sense that fairness is what the relevant authority figure says that it is. For Trump, fairness is that which favors him.

This tendency, that fairness means what Trump says it means, has continued as can be seen in his commutation of the sentence of Roger Stone. According to Trump, "Roger Stone was treated very unfairly. Roger Stone was brought into this witch hunt, this whole political witch hunt and the Mueller scam—it's a scam, because

it's been proven false. And he was treated very unfairly, just like General Flynn was treated unfairly; just like Papadopoulos was treated unfairly. They've all been treated unfairly" ("Remarks by President Trump" 2020). My argument sheds light not so much on Trump's behavior (which could be explained as pathological narcissism, say, "fairness means what I say it means..."); rather, understanding the Trump phenomenon in terms of SFM/DCT helps to explain why his supporters accept his often implausible or misleading statements.

3.2 The Meaning of Right and Wrong

Trump's coopting of the meaning of fairness is significant in itself. Moreover, this coopting enables inroads to a broader and more fundamental scope of moral meaning, the definition of right and wrong. Such a maneuver makes perfect sense when applying the metaethical aspect of DCT/SFM to the Trump phenomenon. For example, returning to the investigation of Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election, when Trump says with great surety that "there was no collusion with Russia; there is no obstruction of justice," the metaethical component of DCT sheds light on these claims given that their veracity is to be determined via investigation (e.g., the Mueller probe). As the legitimate authority within the DCT/SFM worldview, Trump's claims translate along the lines of "Since collusion and obstruction of justice are wrong, it is not possible that I could have committed such acts since I am the one who determines what counts as right and wrong." Again, Trump's language should not be taken as a report on the world of facts. Rather, Trump's language should be taken as providing or demonstrating the meaning of certain key terms. The upshot is always that given the accepted definition on the part of Trump and his supporters of key moral terms, Trump's actions are always right. More precisely, they are right by definition.

3.3 Party over Country

Seeing the affinities between SFM and DCT sheds light on another common occurrence within the Trump phenomenon. One reason the Trump administration and its supporters do not admit to any wrongdoing on its part can be illuminated by seeing the affinities between SFM and the metaethical component of DCT. That the administration did *x means* that *x* is right. Even in the face of overwhelming evidence, they admit to no wrongdoing with respect to, for example, the allegation of colluding with Russia during the 2016 election; they admit no wrongdoing not only to protect themselves, but also, I suggest because they believe, as surrogates for who they regard as legitimate authority (Trump), they cannot commit wrongdoing: If they do *x* in support of legitimate authority, *x* is right. While their denials of wrongdoing are understandable, they will not admit to even what they have been doing (e.g., having contact with Russian operatives) because anything they did was in the service of having Trump win the election, and having Trump win the election is the best, and thus morally right, outcome, recalling that, for SFM, defending SFM is the ultimate

priority.³ Entrenched partisanship is a well-established feature of the US political landscape. Conservative tribalism in particular, though, makes more sense once one understands that the ultimate aim of SFM is to uphold SFM. This aspect of the SFM worldview illuminates Republicans' seeing no difference between promoting conservative interests and what they would consider as being in the best interests of the US.

An example of the convergence between promoting conservative, SFM ideals and what SFMists would see as pursuing the best interests of the country can be seen in what progressives would likely consider voter suppression. Nothing could be more in keeping with American democracy than ensuring that all eligible voters are able to exercise their franchise, one might think. However, by making voting more difficult by, e.g., limiting polling stations, in areas that historically tend to vote for Democrats, Republicans are helping to ensure that candidates who support conservative values get elected. The same can be said of partisan gerrymandering. For example, when asked about the Republican motives for drawing the North Carolina electoral map, one of its architects replied, "I propose that we draw the maps to give a partisan advantage to 10 Republicans and three Democrats, because I do not believe it's possible to draw a map with 11 Republicans and two Democrats" (Hise and Lewis 2019). The propriety of the act of gerrymandering itself is not even in question. Since this act is in the service of promoting and preserving SFM values it is thereby a right act and thus one that presumably promotes a greater good. One diagnosis could be that this is simply a naked power grab. However, such an assessment is inadequate. Democrats might also be prone to enhancing their electoral prospects when they can as well. The difference, though, is that such questionable practices are inconsistent with progressive, Democratic values. While not suggesting that Democrats always act in a manner that is consistent with their values, the situation as concerns the SFM, conservative mindset is quite different. These questionable, voter-suppression tactics are entirely consistent with SFM values. Since these tactics would be in the service of promoting and protecting SFM values, SFMists, as seen in the case of gerrymandering in North Carolina, would not even regard these acts of voter suppression as being wrong; they might regard such practices as simple prudence, safeguarding the country from what SFMists regard as dangerous, unAmerican ideas. In an important sense, to the conservative mindset, those who are not SFM conservatives do not even count as compatriots and are often regarded as "unAmerican." This idea emerges frequently, ranging from memes on social media suggesting that Democrats are not Americans (Loew 2020) to Dineesh D'Souza's documentary, *Hillary's America*, which concludes with him asking, "So how will you know when you have become an American? You'll know, when you become a Republican" (D'Souza 2020).

An important ramification of this aspect of SFMism, upholding the SFM worldview as the ultimate priority, is that all issues become partisan issues. This SFM

³ Of course, another explanation for why they will not admit to wrongdoing is that they are pathological liars. However, such an explanation is neither nuanced nor particularly helpful in trying to understand the situation.

tendency explains a lot. For example, white evangelical Christians aggressively support Trump despite his lack of any significant affiliation with their religious beliefs. His lack of Christian credentials is irrelevant since they see in Trump someone who is always fighting for their side, especially against the liberal opposition, and since the chief aim of SFM is to preserve SFM itself (Lakoff 2002: 74, 98), again, all issues become partisan issues: either you support SFM or you do not.

We also see this mentality, the preservation of the SFM worldview as the ultimate goal, in connection with the partisanship that has come to be associated with situations in which facts should be our guide. It is truly astonishing to think that, for example, trusting the findings of science, as they pertain to climate change or the coronavirus pandemic, say, or caring about foreign intrusions into US electoral processes, have become partisan issues. However, when the findings of science and investigations into foreign interference in US elections, despite their having the imprimatur of those with relevant expertise, undermine what SFMists regard as legitimate authority, it is easier to see how these become partisan issues.

A related ramification of a DCT/SFM inspired move toward Trump authoritarianism involves treating “partisan” as though it refers to anyone who opposes those whom SFMists regard as the legitimate authority. Again, we see this in Trump supporters’ accusations concerning the Mueller investigation. Despite the fact that those overseeing the investigation were all lifelong Republicans, Trump supporters, true to their SFMism, regard the Mueller investigation as a partisan attack on Trump. Robert Mueller, a Republican, was appointed to head a special investigation into the matter of Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election by Rod Rosenstein, who not only is also a Republican, he was appointed by Trump himself. This DCT/SFM revision of the meaning of “partisan” does not reflect mere loyalty; rather, in keeping with DCT being a metaethical theory, this attitude reflects a virtual realignment of political affiliation. Altering the meaning of the term *partisan* reflects the notion that for Trump and his supporters, the more meaningful division in the US political landscape is not between Republicans and Democrats but between those loyal to Trump and those who are not. This attitude also has the effect of disarming criticisms of Trump as, by definition, merely partisan attacks. More specifically, any position unfavorable to Trump is regarded as a partisan attack even if the “attack” is undertaken by fellow Republicans. There can be no legitimate criticism of the legitimate authority by this rendering of the SFM/DCT mindset.

3.4 “The Enemy of the People”: The Meaning of Fair, Unbiased Reporting

Ainsley Earhardt, a host of the show Fox and Friends and demonstrable Trump supporter, offers this account of the attitude taken by Trump and his supporters toward the mainstream (or should I say “lamestream”?) media. “That’s why he’s saying it’s fake news. And he’s saying, if you don’t want to be called the enemy, then get the story right, be accurate and report the story the way that I want it reported” (Wemple 2018). According to the SFM/DCT mindset, fair and accurate reporting means reporting the story the way the one regarded by SFMists as the legitimate authority wants a story to be reported. This “analysis” of Earhardt’s suggests that to the

Trump-supporting SFMist, bias means anything not supportive of what they take to be his legitimate authority.

3.5 The Conservative Worldview Becomes the Default

Since the SFM worldview is the only one considered to have legitimacy by conservatives, they regard their worldview as the default. So when the left does something, that action is often regarded as "politicizing" the issue. When the right does something (or does not take action), that political stance is regarded by DCT/SFMists as on the order of being divinely sanctioned, giving the position in question the air of seeming natural to the conservative mindset and thus is not seen as politicizing the issue. Moreover, not doing anything, (which also has political ramifications, ramifications that are congenial to conservatism) is not seen as politicizing whatever the issue might be. The issue of gun control provides a clear example of this dynamic. The discourse after a mass shooting is so predictable one could write a script in anticipation. Those on the right, favoring a maximally broad interpretation of the Second Amendment of the US Constitution favoring gun ownership will say the immediate aftermath is a time for grieving. They will excoriate those on the left who favor stricter gun control laws for "politicizing" the issue, seeking to exploit a tragedy to pursue their partisan agenda while seemingly oblivious to the fact that their position not to pursue gun regulation is also a "politicized" move. In broader terms, the status quo is seen as "natural" by virtue of its being in keeping with the relevant conservative, SFM sensibilities.

The events in Charlottesville, VA in 2017, in connection with the "Unite the Right" rally, and Trump's response to them, make more sense once we understand the SFMist tendency to see the status quo sanctioned as the norm. If the status quo is complacent acceptance of whites holding an advantaged place in the social order, then we can better understand conservative umbrage to the position of the counter-protesters at the rally. Even though standing up against racism should hopefully be recognized as the obviously correct moral position, by bucking the status quo these counter-protesters were viewed by SFMists as part of the problem. We see this dynamic in play in the case of Heather Heyer who tragically lost her life in Charlottesville ("Charlottesville" 2019). Even though she was run over by a car driven by a white supremacist, Trump still could not bring himself to condemn white supremacists, indicating that there was blame on both sides. On the DCT/SFM view, the counter-protesters transgression was to oppose what conservatives see as the established order which carries with it something akin to divine sanction.

Treating the status quo as the default, on the order of being divinely sanctioned, is a recurring conservative theme. DCT/SFM enables conservative worldviews to dictate (the meaning of) the terms of debate. That is, when political discourse is framed in ways that have balance, objectivity, accuracy or the like as the intent, conservatives feel as though there is bias against them. A recent example can be drawn from Trump's spat with Twitter, in which he claimed that fact-checking his tweets exemplified the bias of social media against conservative voices (Bond, Shannon and Schneider, Avie 2020). More broadly, in keeping with this inclination for treating

their worldview as normative, SFM conservatives tend to regard sympathy toward their perspectives as a condition of not evincing bias. As reactions to the coronavirus pandemic have demonstrated, expert opinions have largely been eschewed since it is a widespread conservative belief that experts (and “elites” generally) are biased against conservatives (Brownstein, Ronald 2020). The metaethical perspective provided by the synthesis of DCT/SFM illuminates these conservative views by showing how SFM conservatives regard their worldview as the default and as normative, on the order of divinely sanctioned thus making its preservation the highest priority.

3.6 The Loss of Expertise

For SFM conservatives, there is no such thing as expertise, if by expertise we mean mastery of a given area independent of what is in keeping with what the relevant authority dictates. This repudiation of expertise has been a recurrent theme during the Trump era. Indeed, as Michael Sandel argues throughout his recent book, resentment toward those with expertise (those with credentials, as Sandel puts it), has in large part fueled support for Trump (Sandel 2020). This resentment is perhaps most notable in the US response to the coronavirus pandemic. A reason for this situation involves the loss of objective/extra-personal standards. At its most extreme, a point that the Trump phenomenon has possibly thrust upon us, DCT/SFM eschews any standard for what counts as correctness other than what the authority, Trump in this case, dictates. The recommendations of those with identifiable medical expertise (e.g., Dr. Anthony Fauci, the leading epidemiologist in the US) typically mean nothing to Trump; moreover, his supporters trust him more than they trust Dr. Fauci or the Center for Disease Control when it comes to COVID-19 (Impelli 2020). Relatedly, there is a tendency to become inured to criticism since those who criticize the relevant authority, by definition, are wrong, according to the SFM worldview.

4 Conclusion

I have argued that the synthesis of the metaethical aspects of George Lakoff’s conception of Strict Father Morality (SFM) and Divine Command Theory (DCT) help us to have a better understanding of the Trump phenomenon, that US President Trump regularly deviates from accepted facts and his supporters have no problem with this practice. We misunderstand the situation if we presume that Trump’s mendacity and his supporters’ credulity account for this situation. More specifically, I have argued that the authoritarian thread that runs through SFM/DCT provides Trump, as the perceived legitimate authority, with the justification—in his view as well as in the eyes of his supporters—to dictate the meaning of key concepts, for example, truth, fairness, and justice. As a result, when Trump says something that seems plainly false, I suggest that we better understand the situation if we regard Trump as taking himself to be defining what the term in question means. This situation, as I have argued throughout, has far-reaching ramifications, from destabilizing

the meaning of key moral terms to all issues becoming partisan issues to the loss of expertise.

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