FOR OUR FIERCE HERO
SITS SHELL-SHOCKED IN HIS TENT,
GLAZED OVER, GAZING
INTO OBLIVION.
HE HAS THE THOUSAND-YARD STARE.

– SOPHOCLES, AJAX, CA. 2500 YEARS AGO
Moral Injury is a debilitating psychological or spiritual damage resulting from transgression of deeply held moral beliefs and expectations.

It is damaging our warriors and families and friends. It is damaging our communities and it is damaging the societies that sent them to war.

Even as we work to understand it better, we know we can reduce its costs and impacts now.
This publication has been produced by the Moral Injury Initiative, which is a joint research and policy project of the Center on the Future of War at Arizona State University and the PLuS Alliance which links Arizona State University, Kings College, London, and the University of New South Wales.

*Moral Injury, Towards an International Perspective* is co-edited by

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Moral Injury

Brad Allenby and Tom Frame

Karl Marlantes’ 2011 book, What It Is Like To Go To War, is a powerful description of one person’s experiences in combat in the Vietnam War, written so that even civilians and those who never served can understand a little of what war does to people. It is not only brilliantly written, but it is unusual in that Marlantes opens up not just the physical and organizational sides of combat, but the emotional and the spiritual side, the human side. In places, it is a little like Catch 22, except the bullets, the death, and the spiritual agony are real. After you read the papers in this publication, go back and read his book, and you’ll not just understand, but perhaps feel, what “moral injury” is.

Marlantes’ book also reminds us that since the dawn of organized human violence it has been apparent that armed conflict profoundly affects those who participate in it. In war, physical violence and killing are not just ever present, but are socially and legally approved. For this reason, ritual or
Wounds to the physical body can heal and leave no continuing legacy, unseen wounds to the mind and the spirit are often deeply felt and long lasting. This, too, dates back to the dawn of war: 2500 years ago Sophocles, a veteran himself, wrote in his play Ajax, “for our fierce hero sits shell-shocked in his tent, glazed over, gazing into oblivion. He has the thousand-yard stare.” That term, “the thousand yard stare,” was resurrected in World War II and is still with us, as is the spiritual and moral pain it represents. Ajax, to maintain his honor and his sense of self, ultimately commits suicide. That, too, is still with us.

What is Moral Injury?

We define “moral injury” very simply: moral injury is debilitating psychological or spiritual damage resulting from transgression of deeply held moral beliefs and expectations.

While it is possible that moral injury is a response that can arise under many circumstances, we limit ourselves in this discussion to moral injury arising in combat or, more broadly, military environments. We do this because of the deep social concern about returning veterans in our societies, because we feel that clarifying the concept and thus enabling the mitigation of moral injury would mark a significant step forward in our ability to welcome our veterans back from war, and because this is a domain where moral injury can best be identified and explored before the concept is possibly extended to others where moral injury may not be as clear and as easy to identify and mitigate. There are very few data or studies, for example, involving individuals with moral injury in cohorts other than combat and military veterans.

We are not the first to use the term “moral injury”. The American psychologist Jonathan Shay...
differentiated moral injury from the more closely studied phenomenon of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), defining it as occurring because “there has been a betrayal of what is morally correct; by someone who holds legitimate authority; and, in a high-stakes situation”. While representing an excellent start, we have broadened the term because subsequent studies and reports from veterans have indicated that it is too limiting to tie moral injury only to actions by superiors. In this, we follow Brett Litz, who expanded Shay’s definition to include “maladaptive beliefs about the self and the world” in response to “perpetrating, bearing witness to, failing to prevent, or learning about acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations”.

Since 2014 the term has been used in professional and popular literature in the United States, and Canada, and more recently in Australia and Britain. Across the board, however, there is a mistaken assumption that there is currently general consensus on its causes and consequences. In fact, few studies into moral injury have been undertaken outside the United States or from a discipline other than psychology, and within the United States research is at an early stage, with much of the data still sparse, impressionistic, and anecdotal. Moral injury has not been the focus of research within the armed forces of Commonwealth countries, such as Britain or New Zealand.

It is apparent even at this stage, however, that moral injury differs from PTSD. Some confusion may arise because reports from veterans indicate that a person can simultaneously incur a moral injury and suffer PTSD through a single event or experience. Moreover, especially because PTSD is a condition of longer standing, it is easy to conflate the two. A major difference, however, is that trauma needs to be present in a diagnosis of PTSD. It is not required in the case of moral injury. For a person to be morally injured their moral values, their moral reasoning, and their moral compass must be affected in some way. The involvement of morality makes moral injury different from PTSD and other service-related mental health conditions and psychological disorders. Unlike PTSD, moral injury often involves deep guilt and shame, and it is thus ineffectively treated using methods which have shown some promise against PTSD.

One of the more interesting and effective media presentations of the challenges veterans face can be found, surprisingly, in Garry Trudeau’s Doonesbury comic strip (for which he has won many plaudits and awards from veterans and military organizations). In particular, one of the comic’s main characters, “BD,” and his family are shown dealing with the challenges of physical and mental injury suffered in combat upon his return from combat to civilian life. Although as in many cases today
the difference between PTSD and moral injury isn’t explicitly recognized in the comic, it is apparent in BD’s experiences. When he has his leg blown off in the battle for Fallujah, the physical trauma leads to PTSD, but his most repressed memory is when, trapped in an ambush, he gives orders to his convoy to drive at high speed through an urban civilian crowd to escape, with the implication that civilian casualties resulted. He feels deeply guilty as a result; an outcome that is not a physical trauma, but a moral trauma.¹

**The Path Forward**

While the discipline of psychology appears to accept the existence of moral injury among uniformed personnel, it is still a young and evolving concept, and our understanding today is largely based on anecdotal evidence and personal testimonies. There are, for example, no references to moral injury in the most recent edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. A continuing challenge for scholars and practitioners is, therefore, continuing to clarify the relationship between moral injury and PTSD, and better define moral injury in symptomatic and operational terms. It is also important, however, that the need for research and data collection augment, and not diminish or dilute, the effort to help those who are currently suffering from moral injury. For those who suffer from moral injury today, the pain is immediate and real, and may result in serious consequences.

It is necessary to expand the disciplinary scope around the study of moral injury. To date, much of the writing about moral injury has represented the medical perspective, which is obviously important but is not sufficient. Unlike PTSD, for example, moral injury involves spiritual and ethical realms that engage theologians and religious figures, and philosophers. Unlike physical injury or PTSD, moral injury conceptually and pragmatically engages veterans not as victims or patients, but as integral partners in both understanding the condition, and enabling those who suffer moral injury to work together to reduce symptoms and moral pain. Operational military and security organizations, and those that provide health care to veterans, are also partners in understanding and mitigating moral injury, although to date they have not significantly participated in those efforts.

It also appears to be the case, based on initial work in Australia and elsewhere, that moral injury may be expressed differently in different cultures. Because it is at least in part a wound to identity and spirit, and these are of course different in different societies, an important area of study is cross-
cultural comparisons of symptoms, occurrence, and effectiveness of mitigation strategies. It is an interesting but unaddressed question as to whether different units within a single country’s military have differences as well: do U.S. Marines, for example, have the same form and severity of moral injury as U.S. Army infantry, or Special Forces? Does (or can) training affect the incidence and severity of moral injury?

As the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia have been close allies in a range of recent conflicts, most significantly Afghanistan and Iraq, and American, British and Australian uniformed personnel have similar experiences of peacekeeping, peace monitoring and humanitarian relief work, a comparative multi-cultural study of moral injury might do much to identify the role of culture and service ethos in the causes and consequences of moral injury.

For this reason, the Center on the Future of War has created the Moral Injury Initiative, supported by a PLuS Alliance project team, including experts from Arizona State University, Kings College London, and the University of New South Wales. This project is a ‘natural fit’ for the PLuS Alliance whose partner institutions have close and continuing relationships with the armed forces of the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia, and whose Fellows are already acquainted with the experiences of uniformed men and women. It is also consistent with research at the Center on the Future of War at ASU and the Australian Centre for the Study of Armed Conflict and Society at UNSW Canberra.

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1 Garry Trudeau, *The War Within: One More Step at a Time* (Andrew McMeel Publishing) (2006). Trudeau’s efforts to educate civilians about the challenges of returning from combat through his comic strip have earned him significant recognition from the military, including the Commander’s Award for Public Service by the Department of Army, the Commander’s Award from Disabled American Veterans, the President’s Award for Excellence in the Arts from Vietnam Veterans of America, the Distinguished Public Service Award from the American Academy of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, and a special citation from the Vet Centers.
In Afghanistan, it was the Marines who taught me about moral injury. I hadn’t noticed it, which was odd given my background as a war protester and conscientious objector, then foreign correspondent and war reporter. I missed moral injury, like most of us. But once I knew it, it was hard not noticing it everywhere among the people I knew at war or returned from it.

As an embedded reporter, I trained to deploy with, among many others, the 1st Battalion, 6th Marine Regiment. For months at Camp Lejeune and then in Kandahar and Helmand Province, I ate and slept and traveled on missions with the Marines of 1/6. I wrote about their daily lives and their families wrote back (“Tell Lance Cpl. Wilkinson to call his mother!”). We came under fire together. I sat with the commander as he grieved over the first two of his Marines killed in combat.
In any war there’s hardly time to register the life-altering events that stream past, let alone absorb them. So it wasn’t until a few years later that Nik Rudolph and I talked about the time he killed a child. It was on the outskirts of Marjah, in a firefight that went on for hours. At one point Nik, then a lance corporal, noticed someone coming around the corner of an adobe wall, firing at him and his fellow Marines. Nik got him in the sights of his M-4 rifle and saw that it was a kid of maybe 12 years. Without hesitation, he fired.

I once embedded with a different Marine battalion for a year, and in that time I saw and felt this truth: in war you grow to love those with whom you serve. I mean love in the immediate, practical and uncomplicated sense of unconditional devotion. The seed is planted in boot camp or basic. You are responsible for your buddy, no matter what. Over time and under pressure, that becomes a rock-hard, joyful commitment that can surpass in intensity any relationship that Marine or soldier will ever again experience.

None of this was in Nik’s mind when his finger tightened on the trigger and the boy fell. It went too fast. But the devotion to his fellow Marines explains why he killed without hesitation. Responsible, no matter what. Does that mean killing a child to protect those you love? Yes, it does.

It was what the military calls a ‘good kill.’ Tactically and legally correct. All the laws of war and Geneva Conventions, check: the boy was a combatant engaged in hostile action. You’d have to say also, morally correct, protecting those you love.

But Nik killed a child, and when he came home to California, that fact came home with him. In that one act, he was both tactically and morally correct and, in his darkest moments, guilty of a heinous crime. It didn’t help that politicians lauded his combat bravery and strangers thanked him for his service.

Moral injury, in its simplest and most compelling sense, is a violation of an individual’s sense of what’s right, a definition I borrow from Dr. Jonathan Shay, a longtime friend, former VA psychiatrist and author. It could apply to many human situations, but in wartime, I find, it the violation of what’s right seems to have a particularly cruel edge. It can be the shock and grief of seeing a loved one suddenly killed. It can be the guilt and shame of a medic who couldn’t save a mortally wounded soldier.
Often it is the revulsion and guilt at carrying out the one task for which the military exists: killing. Chuck Newton is a tall, solidly built young man and we’ve talked extensively about this since we returned from Afghanistan.

As a Marine, he was good at killing and in Helmand Province in 2010 he killed many times, at a distance and up close. He’d joined the Marines after 9/11 “because I wanted to kill,” he told me once, “And I went and did it and thinking back on it, you know … that’s too heavy for one person to take on. I don’t know that there’s anybody who’s not psychopathic who isn’t hurt by it.”

That human revulsion at killing seems to be universal (although it certainly can be overridden by training, fear or passion). Thus it’s astonishing, and should be unacceptable, that military training prepares men and women to kill but fails to prepare them to deal with the emotional and psychological consequences of killing. In some 30 years of watching U.S. military combat training, I have never seen men and women being coerced to kill. Charging a straw-stuffed human figure with a bayonet yelling “kill kill kill” is a myth, in my experience. The military teaches its fighters to kill under difficult circumstances and to kill with precision. And it insists on extreme measures to limit the killing of noncombatants. But those we send into close combat are never told of the risk to themselves. Never trained or prepared for the effects documented by the VA psychologist Shira Maguen: that those who have killed in battle are forever at higher risk of psychological damage, alcohol abuse, anger, relationship problems and even suicide, than those who never killed. Those who have killed, she told me, often feel that “they don’t deserve to be happy.”

How could we help? I discovered a common thread between the work I do as a journalist, and some of the most promising professional therapies being developed. That is, finding ways to enable a veteran to tell his or her story without being judged. Without being excused, either. Veterans like Nik Rudolph, who shot a child, and Chuck Newton, who killed many times, are often reluctant to share those experiences. What would ordinary “nice” people think? It can be
healing for them to have someone listen with validation, acknowledging their experience and the moral injury it caused.

I learned that also from the Marines, on a day when we were sitting around drinking beer and telling stories and Nik talked, haltingly, about killing the child. I was searching for a response -- Oh, you couldn’t help it, it was war, wasn’t your fault, and similar unhelpful phrases, when one of the other Marines piped up with what I have come to see as the perfect response. “Yeah,” he said. “That was fucked up.” We all nodded. Notice the acknowledgement that something bad happened -- that’s critical. But there is no blame. It happened in the past and is over, and we are still here with you and we still love you. That’s listening with validation.

And that’s our part of war. As civilians, we enable young men and women to be recruited and trained, and we stay home while they go to face those enormous moral dilemmas. Shoot a child, or not? We fail to insist that the military prepare them to absorb moral blows. We are complicit in failing to acknowledge, to them or to ourselves, the ugly truths of war. And when they return, too often we find ways to avoid hearing their stories. Perhaps that’s our own small moral injury. We can never feel the full weight of another’s moral injury. But healing can begin with simple listening.

David Wood is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist who has covered war and the military for more than 35 years. His most recent book, What Have We Done: The Moral Injury of Our Longest Wars, was published in November 2016
A Personal Perspective: Australia

Tom Frame

Australia is a trading nation with global interests. Despite its physical size, natural resources and advanced economy, Australia’s population is relatively small (approximately 23 million) when compared to the United States and the United Kingdom. Defending the Australian people and their property is a task that has always required a collective approach to national security. As a country aspiring to be a ‘good international citizen’ and an active alliance contributor, Australia has participated in armed conflicts, trade protection, peacekeeping missions and disaster relief far from the continent’s shores. Australian personnel fought in the two world wars (1914-1918 and 1939-1945), the Korean War (1950-1953) and the Vietnam War (1962-1975). It contributed personnel to the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960), the Indonesian Confrontation (1964-1966) and to later peacekeeping missions in Somalia (1992-1995), Cambodia (1992-1993), Rwanda
(1994-1996), and East Timor (1999-2000) as well as supporting NATO states containing the spread of Soviet hegemony after 1945. Since the end of the Cold War in 1989 and the Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait in 1990, Australian uniformed and civilian personnel have been involved in a series of operational deployments in situations of moral complexity and ethical ambiguity.

**Acknowledging the Legacies of War**

A number of Australian uniformed personnel who saw active service in South Vietnam were diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after its inclusion in the third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III) in 1980. Over the ensuing three decades PTSD has become widely known and generally acknowledged as a legacy of many operational deployments. In 2014, Australian researchers began to explore the existence of ‘moral injury’ after the concept gained cogency and currency among American writers. There was general acceptance among Australian scholars and practitioners that a person’s values system and ethical decision-making could be injured and their moral judgement impaired by deployed service. The first detailed study of moral injury among Australian Defence Force (ADF) members was published in late 2015.

Australian researchers quickly settled on a series of foundational questions: what differentiates moral injury from traumatic stress? How is moral injury incurred? What are its ‘symptoms’ and do they differ among uniformed personnel and civilians? Can individuals prepare themselves for the possibility of moral injury? Who has responsibility for the care of the morally injured? How is care best rendered? Given the unhelpful designation of most ‘unseen wounds’ as PTSD since the term first appeared in DSM-III, recent Australian inquiries have broken new ground, given scholars and practitioners a new grammar for describing inner injuries, and altered the nation’s approach to preparing personnel for operations abroad and the community’s role in assisting those returning from overseas service to deal with the legacies of what they saw and heard while away.

**Exploring Moral Injury**

As the provider of undergraduate and postgraduate education at the Australian Defence Force Academy in Canberra and drawing on its 50 years of experience in dealing with the Department
of Defence, in 2014 the University of New South Wales (UNSW) recruited a multi-disciplinary consultative panel consisting of scholars and practitioners drawn from the fields of history, sociology, philosophy, psychology, theology and pastoral care to explore the concept of moral injury and its relevance to Australian experience. They were asked to consider two related questions. First, what evidence supports the existence of moral injury and is moral injury a new experience or simply a new name for an old experience? Second, if moral injury does exist, how does any Australian experience of moral injury compare with that sustained by personnel deployed by Australia’s operating partners? The interactions between panel members produced remarkable consensus and near unanimous agreement on two tentative conclusions.

First, those returning from recent operations abroad appear to have been affected morally by their experiences. These unseen wounds are one of the unavoidable consequences of both the circumstances and the conflicts in which they are deployed. While some of those serving in previous conflicts (pre-1990) were deeply affected morally by their experience, it may be that the forms and features of contemporary Western culture, and the politically contested nature and specific character of recent operations (post-1990), have made uniformed men and women more susceptible to moral injury. This was a contention rather than a conclusion that needed further research to determine whether it was supported by evidence.

Second, as deploying uniformed personnel represent their nation and further its interests, the culture from which an individual is deployed (particularly the social, ethical and religious conventions regulating the conduct of individuals and groups) has an immediate and important influence on the likelihood of a person being injured morally and the possibility that the wound incurred will be debilitating. More specifically, if Australian uniformed personnel sustain a moral injury during their service abroad, the fact that they were sent by the Australian Government and have been personally shaped by Australian popular culture

THE CULTURE FROM WHICH AN INDIVIDUAL IS DEPLOYED HAS AN IMMEDIATE AND IMPORTANT INFLUENCE ON THE LIKELIHOOD OF A PERSON BEING INJURED MORALLY AND THE POSSIBILITY THAT THE WOUND INCURRED WILL BE DEBILITATING.
and social conventions will have a direct bearing on how they are affected and how they deal with their injury. Given that the majority of deploying personnel confronted with acute moral challenges are aged under 30 years – when notions of personal identity and destiny are most fluid – there is a reasonable expectation that young Australians will interpret their service overseas in the context of the values and virtues that characterise Australian life and the conduct that Australians consider to be acceptable. In sum, the way Australians deal with moral injury will reflect an Australian outlook on life and living. Although there is an expectation that experiences of moral injury among Australian, Canadian, British and American uniformed personnel will have common elements, the influence of culture on an individual’s self-perception, and on their personal narrative, militates against generalised definitions of moral injury that do not take country of origin into account.

Both observations were naturally tentative given the paucity of extant research into moral injury. There was, however, a significant merging of minds and a shared realisation that moral injury was worthy of a wide-ranging study that would examine: i) the full range of unseen wounds (other than PTSD) experienced by deployed personnel; ii) the defining features of moral injury within Australian experience; iii) the relationship between moral injury and PTSD; iv) the place of moral injury as an impediment to Australian Defence Force (ADF) capacity building and resilience training; v) the inclusion of moral injury in ADF character development and moral leadership programs; vi) the acknowledgment of moral injury in national and community commemorative activity; and vii) refining post-deployment care to include the possible experience of moral injury. The deliberations of the consultative panel were published as a collection of essays entitled *Moral Injury: Unseen Wounds in an Age of Barbarism* in November 2015.

The initial focus was on post-1990 operations. This decision was made on two grounds. First, it was not possible to examine the collective experience of Australians in armed conflict since 1901 given the very large number of men and women who have deployed and the enormous breadth of their experience. To give the study a clear beginning and a sharp focus, a decision was made to limit the research to the period after Operation Desert Storm (also known as ‘Gulf War I’) which marks the end of the protracted post-Vietnam period of stability during which very few ADF members deployed. Second, 1990 marks the end of the Cold War, a surge in the number of peacekeeping operations, the beginnings of protracted Middle Eastern conflict involving Western
nations such as Australia, and the proliferation of asymmetrical warfare.

There is no suggestion that the nature of armed conflict has changed since 1990 or that uniformed service has become more demanding in the post-Cold war era. The principal change is in the character of armed conflict with the widespread use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and suicide bombers in the context of insurgencies, the dissolution of the usual combatant-civilian distinction, the rise of irregular warfare propelled by social, political and religious aspirations, and the increasing frequency of genocide, ethnic cleansing and mass deportation. Contemporary operations have witnessed unprecedented levels of interaction between uniformed personnel and civilian populations whose loyalties are ethnic and tribal rather than national and territorial, and whose moral culture may be very different than those with which young servicemen and women are familiar. The simultaneous deployment of ADF personnel to humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, anti-piracy and border enforcement operations has also added substantially to the ambiguity and complexity of modern uniformed service. It is the coincidence of so much ambiguity and so many complex issues that has changed the character of modern conflict.

In 2016, the ADF commissioned UNSW to undertake a more detailed conceptual study of moral injury ahead of undertaking qualitative fieldwork to test ideas and validate conclusions.¹ The first of this study’s four main tasks was providing a detailed description of moral injury and its differentiation from PTSD and other service-related mental health conditions and psychological disorders. In attempting to offer the first Australian perspective, the project team defined moral injury as:

the result of harm or damage (a wound) that reduces the functioning or impairs (injures) the performance of the moral self, which is that part of a person where moral reasoning and moral decision-making takes place. Exposure to, or participation in, actions that violate an individual’s own moral code cause moral injury, because they destabilise the moral norms an individual uses to makes sense of themselves and the world. Moral injury can be sustained through acts of commission and omission. The extent to which these moral norms were ignored, denied or betrayed will determine the severity of the injury, along with the strength of the beliefs and their nature – whether they are foundational, supportive or expressive – within the moral self.

A person can simultaneously incur a moral injury and suffer PTSD through a single event or experience. Trauma needs to be present in a diagnosis of PTSD. It is not required in the case of
moral injury. For a person to be morally injured their moral values, their moral reasoning and their moral compass must be affected in some way. The involvement of morality makes moral injury different from PTSD and other service-related mental health conditions and psychological disorders.

The second of the study’s tasks was identifying the moral values and virtues that are injured during operational service, including combat operations, peacekeeping missions, humanitarian aid and disaster relief, and as part of routine uniformed service including border protection duties. Most examinations of moral injury conclude that a willingness to trust, a readiness to show loyalty, adherence to conviction and confidence in judgement are among individual moral values and virtues most affected by moral injury. This study concurred with these conclusions notwithstanding the absence of fieldwork into moral injury and the paucity of commentary on the incidence of moral injury in non-warlike operations. To date, much discussion of moral injury has been dominated by warlike operations, principally those in Afghanistan and Iraq. Australian researchers noted the paucity of commentary in American literature on peacekeeping and humanitarian missions in places like Rwanda and Somalia while the possibility of moral injury being associated with routine (domestic) service has not been the subject of any attention among Western nations.

The study’s third task was outlining the specifically Australian characteristics of moral injury from a historical and contemporary perspective. The evidence suggests that Australian uniformed personnel have been conscientiously concerned less with the decision-making behind deployments and more with what they have done while deployed. While the political factors associated with a deployment are not unimportant, Australians have been more attentive to the conduct of missions including strategy and tactics. There is also evidence to suggest sensitivity among Australian personnel to the generally brutalising effects of armed conflict and consciousness and to the deleterious effect of such conflict on personal wellbeing and behaviour. Although most researchers agree that moral values are shaped by culture and each nation has its own distinctive cultural traits, it is not yet possible to determine any specifically Australian characteristics of moral injury beyond the general observations made above.

The study’s fourth task was to identify philosophical presumptions in the psychological literature and highlight the confusion and conflation of philosophical terms in much recent psychological
writing on moral injury. Leading accounts of moral injury have been offered by psychologists
drawing on ideas and insights that were originally the focus of philosophical inquiry. Much of the
language used in these accounts lacks precision and an awareness of the epistemological nuances
and metaphysical subtleties associated with concepts like guilt and shame, remorse and regret,
forgiveness and absolution. This lack of precision has contributed to the difficulties associated
with differentiating moral injury from PTSD and for the depiction of moral injury as a ‘mental
health issue’ rather than an unavoidable feature of uniformed service that needs to be managed
by commanders at all levels. The study suggested that where moral injury is not coincident with
PTSD it should be considered a normal human response to extreme conditions that needs to be
addressed rather than being deemed a disorder that ought to be treated.

Moral Injury: The Way Ahead

Australian researchers generally agree that moral Injury is a form of stress injury that may or
may not be coincident with PTSD. Unlike PTSD, moral injury is not predicated on trauma and
may be a delayed reaction to a morally challenging event or experience which itself need not be
traumatic. Moral injury is not specific to people serving in the armed forces although they are
thought to be the most susceptible in that they perform duties that are among the most morally
complex. The few recent Australian studies are inconclusive as to whether the affects of moral
injury transcend inner wellbeing and influence personal conduct. The link between moral injury
and subsequent indiscipline and criminality is presently unknown. A causal connection has yet to
be explored.

Literature surveys of non-Australian works reveal that extant definitions and descriptions of
moral injury are based predominantly on anecdotal evidence and personal testimonies. Research
into moral injury continues to be dominated by American psychologists who have generally
overlooked the non-American experience of moral injury. Australian researchers have noted,
however, that philosophers, sociologists and theologians in the United States have begun to
contribute to the emerging literature on moral literature by identifying definitional deficiencies
and challenging narrow descriptions in extant accounts. The most recent American studies
have tried to quantify moral injury and have contended that moral injury is a spiritual and/or
existential malaise and not a psychological disorder.
Given that the causes and consequences of moral injury have been the subject of attention among Australian scholars and practitioners since 2014, it is not surprising that responses to the incidence and prevalence of moral injury remain tentative. As the ADF assesses the overall readiness of its members to deploy but does not assess their moral resilience, the identification and assessment of moral injury remains problematic. Notwithstanding sincere attempts to address moral injury within the ADF and the promotion of moral injury ‘recovery’ programs outside the ADF, they have not been devised or validated with the benefit of field research.

Future research should, therefore, concentrate on the moral character of the events that are thought to injure uniformed personnel and focus specifically on how moral injury impairs individual performance. Such research will assist commanders in managing the moral health of those within their command and the moral complexity of the tasks committed to them. Nations like the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia will gain a great deal of empirical data from collaborative research – at least at the level of confirming concepts and validating conclusions. This work will be vital in relation to the influence of host culture. Researchers are yet to determine the role of culture in the incidence and severity of moral injury. It appears, however, that visions of the state and the uniformed service to which a person belongs are certainly decisive factors. Researchers can surmise the reasons but they remain unsure as to the extent. Given its importance, the time for such research is now.

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1 This fieldwork was later stalled by concerns that ADF personnel might incriminate themselves and others during interviews with project team members.
A Personal Perspective: American

Provided to David Wood by an anonymous serving officer

It did not bother me to see the body of an enemy combatant that I had killed. Over three deployments to Afghanistan as a US Army Special Forces Detachment Commander, I killed many enemy fighters. Once, standing over the body of one fighter, I wondered what was going through his mind when he died. While not happy at his death, I was not despondent, either. I had done what was required. I performed my duty to my country, my soldiers, and myself. His death was the outcome of an honorable exchange between combatants, who, for whatever reason, chose to take up arms and attempt to kill each other. I happened to come out on top in this instance. Thankfully so.

This experience did not deter me from continuing to serve as a combatant. It was a way of life and an expression of my personally held values, values that I believed were consistent with the
understanding of what the war involved. It was, after all, socially and legally sanctioned. In fact, in the immediate, personal aftermath, and the dozens more encounters that were like it, my clarity of purpose, my sense of justice and my moral bearings always remained intact, if not reinforced, by the experience. This is what war was about, or so I thought—killing the enemy before they killed you; protecting my men, them protecting me in return; freeing an oppressed people from the insidiousness of violent tyranny. But I was yet to experience the other parts of war, the part that no one talks about—killing civilians. That, too, is part of war—a part of the American way of war.

The seven months of fighting leading to one civilian casualty incident were brutal. My team was comprised of twelve Special Forces soldiers along with 35 Afghan militiamen. Prior to the civilian casualty incident, my team had been involved in over 45 enemy contacts involving sustained direct fire and ground maneuver against an often numerically superior enemy force. The enemy had the advantage in cover from overhead fires, concealment from observation, and the ability to maneuver over ground. They did not wear uniforms and often operated out of villages making it harder for Coalition forces to distinguish them from civilians. On the flip side, my team had an advantage in surveillance aircraft and the ability to apply close air support using communications and technology that the enemy didn’t have. Despite the tactically inferior positions from which we often fought, by leveraging our strengths I would conservatively estimate that my small team of just under 40 soldiers killed over 500 enemy fighters, while losing only three members of my own fighting force. The final mission of this deployment proved to be entirely different, however.

My team was directed to wrest a district of Southern Afghanistan from the Taliban (TB). The district had a population of about 15,000 Afghans who lived in and around our firebase. Intelligence, reporting, and recent operations indicated that the Taliban had infiltrated large portions of the district with fighters who were living in the village. The enemy controlled basic services, government, and lines of communication throughout the entire area.

To succeed in our mission, I requested and received command authority over a force that comprised three Special Forces teams, a mortar section, and an attached Afghan partner force with approximately 100 militia fighters. In addition, I had direct support from an AC-130 Gunship, a flight of two F-15s, an airborne surveillance aircraft, an unmanned aerial vehicle,
and two ground-mounted forward looking infrared surveillance cameras. It was up to me to integrate and synchronize the entire ground, air, intelligence, direct fire, and indirect fire systems at night. My orders were to manoeuver to contact with an enemy entrenched in a village densely populated with civilians. The operation was conducted according to plan. The results, however, were nothing like I could have imagined. We achieved our military objective, but, arguably, we failed in our moral duty.

As the night advanced, I occupied the top of a hill overlooking the enemy controlled village while the teams under my command moved into a perimeter around the village, far enough away to block an enemy escape, but not too close to force a deliberate engagement. Soon, we began receiving reports on the enemy’s disposition in and around the village. Two of my teams exchanged small arms fire with a minor enemy element and remained in light contact throughout the evening. During the night, I received eleven separate reports citing a total of more than 100 enemy fighters set to converge on our positions. At least two of these reports included descriptions that the Taliban fighters were travelling with women and children as human shields. Moreover, the enemy was said to have taken up positions inside civilian dwellings. The exact location of enemy elements, and the degree to which they were intermixed with civilians was impossible to know.

As the ground force commander for this mission, I directed the employment of eight bombs and three air-to-ground gun runs against the enemy positions. To be clear, I personally authorized the bombs and gun runs on confirmed enemy positions inside Afghan houses in a densely populated village. Whenever there was a report of enemy fleeing from the site of a bomb drop, I ordered a follow-up attack against the fleeing enemy using air-to-ground gun runs. In the two instances where we could confirm civilians were intermixed with the enemy, I denied authorisation to fire.

Throughout this entire six hours, I was nearly overwhelmed with anxiety. I wasn’t afraid for my own life—those feelings had long passed. But with each attack, I was fearful that civilians were being killed. It wasn’t my intention that civilians should die. I just couldn’t see any other choice. I had an obligation to pursue our adversary, kill them, reduce the exposure of my soldiers to unnecessary harm, and to obey the laws of armed conflict while observing the rules of engagement. Civilian houses became targets when the enemy used them as fighting positions. Groups of people maneuvering against my deployed teammates became enemy troops in the
open. In the end, nothing could have prepared me for what I saw the next morning. That is when my world changed. This is what I remember.

At some point, we saw a dump truck coming out of the village. We stopped it and looked in the bed. It was full of dead men, women, children, and babies. I became dizzy as the reality of what I was witnessing set in. Most were shrouded in funeral gowns. Some were decapitated, including some of the babies. Others were missing arms and legs. We let the truck continue to the cemetery to bury the dead.

Just a short time later, an older Afghan man approached me from afar. He was taking a risk even walking up to us after the events from the night before. Something was different about this man and I didn’t perceive him as a threat so we let him approach. He was convulsed with tears and his body was wracked with despair and visceral pain. He told me, through my interpreter, that I had killed everyone in his family—all his kids, grandkids, and extended family—no one was left alive, except him. In one evening, his entire family ceased to exist. I yelled at him. I told him it was his fault that he had been hiding enemy in his house.

I learned two days later that we killed about 35 civilians during that engagement. We also killed about 65 Taliban fighters. In blunt terms, that was the tradeoff—65 enemy at the cost of 35 civilians. Over the years, not much has changed. That village has traded frequently between Coalition and Taliban control.

When I finally returned home from five years of repeated combat deployments, no one, except those who had served with or before me, seemed to have appreciation for the reality of what we do in war, nor the understanding of how we do it. To me, society remains ignorant, and sometimes I wonder if willingly so, about what happens at war. My moral bearings, my faith system, and my sense of connection to my country and our common values became mired in near total confusion. I began to despise myself for being the person I didn’t know that I was,
or, perhaps, had become. The insidiousness of this realization infected every facet of my life. Nothing was untouched.

Much as with physical injury, recovery from moral injury typically requires extensive support from family, friends, mentors, and healthcare providers over time. But in a profound way, recovery also involves coming to terms with moral principles -- ethics -- and gaining new understanding from them. For me this began with understanding what war really is, not just what I thought it would be or wanted it to be. Because of the nature of Afghan war, distinguishing between combatant and civilian was rarely possible. The concept of proportionality and the principle of double effect became paramount in how I exercised my moral and professional obligations. I realized that in pursuing a valued outcome, I might also cause unintended harm or do things I would otherwise consider deplorable.

**THE MORAL DILEMMA I FACED WAS SPECIFICALLY A CHOICE BETWEEN TWO EVILS AND THE INCONGRUITY OF BEING PLACED IN A SITUATION IN WHICH WHATEVER I DID WOULD BE WRONG.**

Moreover, this kind of reflection involved thinking about what makes a human act morally wrong, and the struggle between objective bad and subjective good (intent). The moral dilemma I faced was specifically a choice between two evils and the incongruity of being placed in a situation in which whatever I did would be wrong. Choosing the lesser of two evils still involves the commission of evil. I had a moral duty, perceived or real, in a situation that at least seemingly required me to act then and there as much as by what might otherwise have been governed by broader, essential norms of natural moral law.

In the end, all I could do was to try to do the best that I could in the circumstances. From this experience, I have learned that my conscience helps me separate right from wrong. George Washington called his conscience ‘that spark of celestial fire’. James Madison said it is the ‘most sacred of all property … and shall not be infringed’. Most applicable to my experience was a remark by Thomas Aquinas who said that conscience ‘absolutely binds man in his decision’, but that conscience can be formed, and one’s reflection on the realities of life from the outset can be
given depth and precision over time.

The old man whose entire family died during the evening I have described, the man I yelled at and faulted because he harbored the Taliban, was simply doing the best he could with what he had. I also did the best I could that evening. That is what war is. These experiences have given me the personal depth and reflective tools to hone my conscience so that if I am confronted by similar circumstances, I am better prepared to do my job and to live with its consequences. I do wonder if the American public has started, or will ever, engage in honest reflection on the nature of war. Such reflection will inform our collective conscience about our political decision making which involves asking a small number of people to undertake these inordinately expensive endeavors in pursuit of the national interest.
A Personal Perspective: Damage and Recovery

Joe Brett

Twelve years ago, a counselor at the Prescott, Arizona Veterans Administration asked if I could recall the day the war changed me, and in doing so, she changed the rest of my life. If it had happened earlier, I might have recovered sooner, and I write this in hope that others will be helped to recover more of their life than I have been able to. This is the story I would tell her today.

Perhaps this story really begins with my older brother Tom, not me. He entered the Army before me, and in August 1967 was in Chulai, Vietnam as an executive officer of an artillery battery, with the America 1 Division. He had been in country three months. It was Saturday, and I was home from ROTC summer camp at Indiantown Cap, PA. My mom, her fun sister, Florence, my dad and
I were talking and laughing at the stories the sisters were telling of their day at Saratoga and the money they had somehow won on the ponies, when I noticed a taxi out our front window, slowing and looking lost. But the taxi stopped and the driver got out and started walking to the front door.

My mother answered the door, and that was when the taxi driver handed her a telegram. She screamed. The cab driver looked so helpless and so terribly sad and sorry for being an unwitting part of this tragic scene. But that was how next of kin were notified by a grateful nation when a son was killed or wounded. A taxi driver was given a telegram to deliver to mothers, fathers, wives, or husbands. We were lucky. Tom was badly burned, but lived, and eventually found his way to law school. But I’ll never forget the symbolism of the taxi driver.

Two years later I was in Vietnam myself, an aerial observer for artillery and forward air controller for fighter bombers. I loved it as it was the perfect assignment for me. We flew each day looking for enemy soldiers to kill by use of artillery, bombs or napalm, sometimes all three in the same mission. We all felt that we had to kill them to protect ourselves and our brothers before they could kill us. Nobody wanted to be the last man killed in a war from which the U.S. was pulling out so killing “them” was our way of saving American lives.

Our small band of observers, The Sundowners, numbered five at any one time with lieutenants rotating in and out as individuals. Our area of operations (AO) was the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). Our tasks included giving a BDA, bomb damage assessment, with attention given to the number killed, to the air and gun crews who participated in each mission. We got shot at a lot and that was part of the game (Churchill once commented on the thrill of being shot at and missed). Old guys rotated home and new guys rotated in. It was said it was better being killed early in your tour so as not to have endured the rigors of 12 months in Vietnam. I religiously checked off each day before I went to bed, lucky for being alive and one day shorter until I could get back to normal.

On the evening of July 29, our little band got the names of our pilots for the next day’s missions. Due to my time on the job, I got the late morning flight. However, the pilot assigned that flight, I felt, was too immature and stunt prone for my “old guy” sensibilities. The pilot I preferred was flying the early mission, so I casually switched flights with a nice, newer Lieutenant, Forrest Hollifield from North Carolina. The benefit to Forrest was that I took the dawn patrol. He got to sleep later and I got another pilot.
We hadn’t been out long on our mission when we received a radio call from our ground crew saying something terrible had happened. We returned at once. Upon landing, we quickly walked the short distance to the wreckage. I pushed my way through the crowd. The pilot and Forrest were laying side by side, arms folded over their chests as if at rest. No blood or visible signs of any harm. Both were dead. Soldiers started lifting them into their respective body bags and I watched, stunned, as Forrest was zipped up in front of my eyes. That should have been me was my only thought.

Finished and watching the ambulance pulling away, I numbly worked my way past the dwindling gathering out to the edge of the runway and knelt in bewilderment. Tomorrow morning, I thought, Forrest Hollifield’s mother is going to get a taxi cab at her front door. She would not read “no imminent danger of death” as my mother had. Another death that did not make a difference to anything made the thought of a god an embarrassing moment. I was left with no god and guilt beyond repair.

For the remaining weeks of my tour, I was in a rage of killing to get even for the loss of Forrest, for the loss of other men and for my own culpability in the death of Mrs. Hollifield’s only child. My friends had rotated home or been killed. I thought about extending to stay and fight, but knew I had to get the hell home as I was in trouble. Although details of the incident sunk like a stone into my unconscious, my dreams were dark, frightening and exhausting.

I remember a moment of madness with a direct hit on suspected bunker I had been stalking. It was filled with the NVA troops, as the fresh signs told me. As more rounds hit, I began frothing at the mouth and screaming like a savage, all of which was covered by the sound of our engine, straining to keep us out of the gun target line. This perfect mission in a war of randomness and meaninglessness; I was consumed in a huge release of pure rage.

For us, we seldom thought of our enemy as human nor were we regarded as such by them. However, at a basic level we knew their mothers feared for the lives of their sons and daughters just as our moms and dads did. I had no idea of how the men who sent us off to war felt about the waste of it all. Did they weep for the loss of life they caused? How did they ask forgiveness for their acts of political miscalculations that resulted in millions being killed and maimed? What god did they pray to? How did they justify their lives against the loss of lives they caused? In a
wrong war all lives lost are innocent lives. But then again, what did I know. Maybe there was some plan in it all and I had somehow been part of some noble cause.

And then I was home, alone, in late August of 1970 to start my new life. I was 24. The real question I never could answer – I could never, even, ask - was how I valued my life against the life of Forrest Hollifield.

That event shaped the rest of my life. It was the instrument of my destiny that I was not ready to properly engage and honor. I was ready to be killed or wounded, but totally unprepared for this type of blow to my soul. My remedy was to run away from the pain. This led to many, many years of doubt, guilt, shame, depression, alcoholism and acts of self-destruction.

I’m finally better. I have come to understand that what I experienced in Vietnam was a moral wound. Luckily for me, I have survived and even thrived with my wound due to a treatment process I undertook, even though I feared it would mark me forever as a loser. What eventually worked for me was the 12-Step program, started by Bill Wilson in 1938 when he published *The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous*. I joined his club on March 7, 1987. It may not work for others, and I am certainly not suggesting that warriors are drug addicts or alcoholics. But drug and alcohol abuse are common symptoms of any moral wound.

There were a number of pieces to my recovery. Telling stories to people that understood what war was like, without judgment from others, is critical. Shame and guilt eventually disappear, and you take ownership of your life, embracing the moral wound as a part of your life experience. You learn to forgive yourself. And you grow.

I was led to reading *The Power of Myth*, a book based on the 1988 documentary that details conversations between mythologist Joseph Campbell and journalist Bill Moyers. I really feel that much can be learned here to help create a program for healing of moral wounds. One begins to feel the nobility of the “Hero’s Journey” of any young man or woman who wears the uniform of their country. Stories are written about heroes who leave their comforts and not about those who stay home.

Campbell relates the archetypal Hero’s Journey as a series of challenges the hero must meet and defeat before he can return home with the prize, victory, or benefit to his tribe. Among the
challenges faced by any hero is the victory over their personal fears and ego. To overcome these two beasts, often depicted as dragons, Campbell speaks of Four Noble Truths and Eight-fold Pathway. We are asking our warriors to not only overcome the challenges on the battlefield but to also overcome any psychological issues that may arise from those battles.

The task before us, as I see it, is to create a program that draws on experiences like mine, so that the morally injured today needn’t wait so many years for recovery. We can, for example, draw on the blessing ceremonies common to many cultures that prepare their warriors for war. These same cultures also offer cleansing and healing ceremonies for warriors returning from battle, and for their families, not just confused and sad taxi drivers. One easy image to visualize is the putting on of war paint prior to battle and then washing it off after the fight. Indeed, I strongly believe that the United States is looking for a compelling and meaningful healing ceremony for our veterans.

Coincidentally I have come across a group of warriors who seem to be embracing much of what is expressed here, including support from Joseph Campbell’s book, *Hero with a Thousand Faces*. You can imagine my joy of discussing this new program, Save a Warrior (https://saveawarrior.org) with one of its members. It felt very familiar. One veteran helping another veteran. The fact that I am 71 and he is 28 made it all the sweeter.

After all, David Wood, whose piece appears elsewhere in this compilation, has told me that his research reveals that when a warrior kills another in combat, he or she will have a 40% increase risk of developing a moral wound. The percentage is higher if a civilian is killed – and many are. That is war. We know that if one is not prepared to manage their moral wound, their moral wound will most assuredly manage them and the quality of their lives. Like any wound, it can easily destroy them.
Today’s veteran is no different from Achilles or any veteran from any war from any part of history. From my experience, and from my readings, and from my friends, I found comfort and pride in realizing that my story was just like all war stories. I was not alone but rather part of the archetypal journey taken by all heroes. However, the journey is not complete until I embrace my fears and my ego, honor all those who died at my hands and forgive myself for the death of my colleague. My actions must reflect the cost of once being a warrior with view of compassion for myself and for others. And it is in that spirit of a warrior, and of compassion, that I hope to contribute to less pain, less shame, and quicker recovery for all veterans, everywhere.

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Moral Injury – A British Perspective

Andrea Ellner

In the British discourse on the effects of war on military personnel the concept of ‘moral injury’ is less well established than in the US and Australia, but the absence of a ‘label’ is no indicator for the non-existence of a phenomenon. First, it is useful to reflect on what we mean by ‘moral injury’. Although there is not a unified definition, moral injury is broadly seen as resulting from situations in which an individual is either forced to act in contravention of their moral framework or observes and feels responsible for not having prevented such acts from being committed by others, regardless of whether that was within his or her power or formal responsibility. Some of its manifestations, such as depression, guilt, shame or a propensity to self-harm, may overlap with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD); and both phenomena may be present simultaneously. There is, however, value in distinguishing it from PTSD.
Moral injury, as understood in this contribution, is a violation of an individual’s moral identity, the moral values by which he or she seek to live, not or not primarily the body and not even in the first instance the psyche. Violating one’s moral identity can undermine or destroy the belief in the one’s own humanity and ability to safeguard the humanity of others. This understanding of the site of moral injury means looking beyond the psychological manifestations and taking seriously Litz et al.’s demand that we apply “an interdisciplinary approach (e.g. military, biological, philosophical, sociological and social psychological, legal, religious, mental health perspectives)” to exploring moral injury.¹

An inquiry into the sources of a person’s values is one good starting point. One’s moral compass is a tapestry of overlapping value systems with multiple sources: the individual’s upbringing, the society and culture into which they were socialized and their understanding of the ethos by which their profession expects them to behave. For members of the military, this includes their civilian moral values, the military and service ethos they acquired when they joined and the moral and ethical underpinnings of the relationship between the armed forces, society and the government.

Under a liberal democratic constitution, they are servants of the state, with the government the legitimate authority entitled to authorize their deployment, but they are also subject to a wider societal narrative of their purpose. The latter matters, because it emanates from and shapes society’s attitudes to the armed forces and their deployment. It also shapes the expectations of service personnel of the socially and politically perceived value and legitimate purpose exercising their profession.

Here is a field of tension which may give rise to moral pain and, if that is unresolved, result in moral injury. The different layers of an individual’s moral compass may conflict with each other. For example, service members who follow government orders to deploy on operations act in accordance with their constitutional obligations, if the war is deemed to be legal. As volunteers, they may perceive not only a legal, but also a moral obligation to fulfil their contract. But more importantly, as illustrated below, they may derive their moral identity from the country’s self-image. So under Tony Blair’s governments Britain was committed to liberal humanitarian interventionism with armed forces that are a ‘force for good’.

A resulting moral identity may be challenged or injured if, for example, individuals experience
the conduct of operations as immoral. Damage to one’s moral compass may conceivably result, if the justness and legality of a war and its conduct are subsequently officially called into question. In Britain, the Chilcot Inquiry’s critical assessment of the justification for, and conduct of, the Iraq War may have such impact, although we cannot predict the likelihood and severity of retrospective moral injury. Some individual service members, however, found themselves confronted with threats to their moral compass already during operations.

Ben Griffin, trooper in the SAS counter-terrorist unit, refused to return to Iraq in 2005, because he could not reconcile his orders with his conscience. Having served with the paras in Northern Ireland, Macedonia and Afghanistan, he was posted with the SAS to serve alongside US Delta Force in Iraq in 2004. Already harboring doubts about the legality of the war, he found it increasingly impossible to morally justify the actions he was expected to take or observed. He had acquired his fundamental beliefs in Britain and its armed forces as ‘a force for good’ during his upbringing and Army training.

Without alluding to the concept of moral injury in his account, most of his narrative on his experiences in Iraq revolved around a mounting sense of moral culpability through his own and his or US units’ actions. His sense of guilt and shame combined with an increasing conviction that their actions ran counter to their mission objectives and instilled fear in a population whose hearts and minds the operations were officially designed to win. Of the two-extreme response to moral injury, he chose not to lower the moral standards of his behavior. By founding the British chapter of Veterans for Peace he is, it seems, seeking to align the world with his moral principles.

He left the Army with an honorable discharge and a commendation on his moral courage from his commanding officer. As part of the leaving process he was interviewed by senior officers and the padre. In his account the padre, rather than seeking to understand his motivations, began the interview by accusing him of being a shirker and coward. As this seems not to have been a special case, it does not bode well for the organization’s ability to assist service personnel in coping with moral pain, let alone moral injury. Service members need confidants, such as a superior whom they can trust, if they are morally troubled and fear going on operations lest they are expected to continue to follow orders that violate their professional ethical framework and personal moral compass.
To enable leaders to assist in preventing moral injury, we need a better understanding of what causes it. This includes better understanding of the wider cultural, societal, historical, political, strategic as well as operational and tactical context of the potential causes of moral injury. We cannot hope to reduce future risk of moral injury during operations or retrospectively, without understanding and addressing failures in decision-making and implementation processes in the context of civil-military relations and within the military chain of command as identified, for example, in the Chilcot Inquiry. Other wars in which British service personnel will have confronted situations in which their moral compass was challenged or unhinged are the two world wars, counter-insurgency (COIN) operations during the wars of decolonization in the Cold War and the peace-keeping operations in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the 1990s.

Accounts of such threats of moral injury cannot only be found in personal recollections, but also in dramatizations. A particularly noteworthy example of the latter is the 1999 television drama *Warriors*. The film explores the impact of real events in Bosnia in 1992 on British peacekeepers. Based on director Peter Kosminsky’s interviews with 90 British soldiers who had been deployed to Bosnia, it shows the moral pain and injury sustained by those soldiers who could not reconcile their inability to intervene because of the extremely restricted mandate with their moral and professional duty to protect civilians. This case study hints at a further dimension of the causes and consequences of moral injury, the need to bear in mind the duty of care to military personnel when defining the mandate and Rules of Engagement.

In Britain, the Armed Forces Covenant (2000) encompasses society’s, the government’s and armed services’ duty of care to serving military personnel and veterans in exchange for their acceptance of unlimited liability, that they may be severely injured or lose their life during service. Service personnel ought to be able to trust that their political masters and military superiors seek to protect them from unnecessary risks of, or assist in coping with, moral injury. This is in the interest of the individual, civilian society to whom a veteran will return, civil-military relations and the military as an organization, which lack of trust can corrode from unit level upwards.
The Armed Forces Covenant deserves greater attention in a research program on moral injury. It may not have prevented or remedied the risks of creating strategic, political and operational conditions that are conducive to the risk of moral injury. It is, however, a reference framework for demanding that government, society and senior military leaders seek to ensure that operations are justified and conducted in a manner that not only protects non-combatants from harm but also preserves to the largest possible extent the humanity of combatants.

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Moral Injury: Learning from the Transitional Justice Experience

Daniel Rothenberg

Why would someone want to speak at length about the torture they experienced? What motivates a person to travel for days to present their account of a massacre, their description of having a child “disappeared,” or their testimony of the impact of forced displacement, particularly when there is no clear, external benefit for doing so? The answer is likely elusive, uncertain, variable, and deeply human. Yet, we know that around the world in multiple countries and contexts those who have suffered some of the most devastating experiences imaginable take on significant risks to personally present their stories before truth commissions and other investigative bodies. Over the past three and half decades, these processes has been institutionalized within the field of transitional justice, providing useful lessons for evolving discussions on moral injury.
WHY WOULD SOMEONE WANT TO SPEAK AT LENGTH ABOUT THE TORTURE THEY EXPERIENCED?

The term, “moral injury” is new, even if the experiences it names have been around for a very long time. The contours of its definition and the value for multiple social actors is in flux and will continue to evolve as the term increasingly finds its way into popular culture. That is, as moral injury is used and tested to see how it can assist individuals and communities make sense of their lived experience, its meaning will shift until it becomes an accepted element of social discourse, a concept widely referenced with a general agreed-upon definition and value. And, it will likely become integrated and codified by professional discourses such as law and medicine. But, for now, moral injury remains an emerging, open-ended idea whose power lies in its ability to effectively name experiences that are inadequately expressed through other more culturally dominant ideas, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, and related concepts about the intense suffering and uncertainty associated with armed conflict. For this reason, it is important to explore the full possibility of meanings of moral injury and to learn, where possible, from other efforts – such as transitional justice – to make sense of the meaning and significance of engaging traumatic experiences.

Beginning in the mid-1980s, there were a variety of grassroots national responses to shifts in governance from authoritarian, often military regimes, to civilian controlled democracies in Latin America, Central and Eastern Europe, and elsewhere. These varied efforts were unified by a common goal of establishing the foundations for a better and more just society in the wake of systematic abuse and the use of repressive violence as a key mode of governance. They created a new language and a new set of related policies to document, analyze, and respond to the devastating impact of past atrocities which, over time, came to be known as transitional justice. Now, these practices are an institutionalized element of global policy with a set of general principles and what is often called a “toolbox” of policy options including: truth commissions that document and analyze past violence; prosecutions in national, international, and mixed tribunals; various modes of memorialization from renaming public sites to creating parks and national days of remembrance; as well as a variety of governmental reforms to limit state excess and address structural conditions that supported and enabled past abuse.
When I worked at the Guatemalan Truth Commission as it planned its methodology, one of the core concerns was how to encourage locals to come forward with their stories within a context of ongoing repression and where many perpetrators remained in power. The internal debates went on for some time with efforts to balance creating conditions in which people would be willing to speak, with concerns for how to protect those who came forward from reprisals. In the end, it was determined that while the material gathered could be carefully protected (and still remains so, many years later), there was no viable way to offer meaningful security to those who decided to speak. Within this uncertain situation, the Commission opened offices around the country, publicized its work, and hoped for the best. In fact, tens of thousands of locals came before the Commission to tell their stories. They presented detailed testimonies about the most intense and brutal experiences of the conflict, allowing the country to gain access to a set of previously hidden personal narratives about the ravages of decades of war and state repression.

I found a similar situation when leading a project to gather testimonies of victims of political violence in Iraq committed under Saddam Hussein’s autocratic regime and following the U.S.-led invasion. We ran the project with an all-Iraqi staff in the middle of brutal civil war. As we prepared the methodology, our team worried that we would end up gathering material that would fail to adequately document the experiences of many Iraqis because people would likely be afraid to speak within such a dangerous and uncertain context. We were concerned that locals would be unlikely to discuss in detail the specifics of vicious ethno-sectarian violence or might be embarrassed to discuss certain types of violations, such as sexual abuse. Yet, we found that when trained interviewers engaged victims within a reasonably safe environment, people were eager to speak openly about what they had suffered. We were able to gather detailed accounts of political violence by all the actors operating at the time and from representatives of every major ethnic group. We also collected stories on a wide variety of experiences and violations. Some of the most compelling testimonies came from women from the most conservative social contexts, such as Shi’a Arabs from Southern Iraq, who presented painfully detailed accounts of systematic rape by state security forces and others.

What I experienced in these contexts is in line with one of the main conclusions of several decades of transitional justice activities around the world, which is that people want to tell their stories where an opportunity is offered to them that creates an environment of official or quasi-official
listening. Clearly, there is something powerfully motivating about offering people an environment to talk, a space within which they believe their stories will be seriously received as part of an effort to broadly communicate to the larger world the reality of intense human suffering. They do not require offers of reparations, payments, or social services, and programs that provide such benefits are no more successful at motivating people to present their testimonies.

Many people I spoke with in Guatemala, Iraq and elsewhere explained that they had never before told their stories to anyone, something researchers around the world hear repeatedly. This is another key lesson of transitional justice. That is, while people want to tell their stories, they often will only do so when provided with an appropriate context within which they feel it is possible and valuable to speak. There is something about the activities of successful transitional justice mechanisms that inspires and motivates people to open up, often for the first time, and reveal their suffering in their own words. And, within this process, there is likely a key lesson for the emerging value and use of moral injury. This suggests that the power of speaking about these experiences lies not in the depth of the personal interaction in terms of any long-term relationship or social link, but rather in the telling itself, in the unburdening and expression of suffering.

The interviews themselves can be intense and demanding. Those presenting testimonies tend to speak in the ways that make the most sense for themselves. Some stories follow a crisp narrative timeline, others jump from one event to another. Some people speak quickly and clearly, while others take breaks or need lengthy periods of silence. It can be both exhilarating and deeply depressing to participate in these processes. These are intimate exchanges, yet often what allows people to speak is the fact that those listening are from outside their social world and will likely leave, often with neither party ever seeing each other again.

The intensity and meaning of this process may well be elevated by the fact that, in many cases, political violence is bound to processes of domination and silencing. Often people’s suffering is linked expressly to personal shame as well as the deep-rooted fear that open discussion will lead to further brutality. In this way, telling one’s story is often a means of healing, a mechanism of liberating oneself from the external threats of vicious repression and from the internal pressures of internalizing one’s victimization. The lived experience of violence can itself be silencing such that telling one’s tale is a way to recover one’s voice and with this, a sense of purpose and dignity.

Some of the same social conditions and profound demands that inspired the creation of the
transitional justice framework currently drive interest in moral injury. Of special significance here are a set of interconnected foundational ideas and commitments that motivate and inspire the field, particularly an acknowledgement of the special status of those directly impacted by violence for understanding its meaning and impact.

The term “moral injury” resonates powerfully with many people. Yet, as a relatively new idea, its definition and social value are still being determined. Those deploying the term might do well to guide its use and management based on lessons from the field of transitional justice. After all, at the heart of moral injury is the idea that healing individuals and a wounded society is a process fraught with complexity and challenges, yet deeply bound to encouraging and enabling people to speak openly and meaningfully about trauma. It is likely that the power of moral injury and its long term usefulness to our society will depend on its presentation as an idea and set of practices that assist people in finding a voice to reaffirm their dignity and sense of self in the wake of profoundly debilitating experiences.

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Remote-Controlled Warfare and Moral Injury

Douglas A Pryer

Technology is quickly reversing a psychological trend that has existed since cavemen first threw rocks at each other. The French strategist Ardant du Picq observed: ‘To fight from a distance is instinctive in man. From the first day he has worked to this end, and he continues to do so’.

Distance not only provides warriors with a sense of safety, but it reduces their psychological resistance to killing other human beings. Today, however, while many of America’s Remotely Piloted Aircraft (or “drone”) warriors sit physically safe in trailers in Nevada, their human targets on the other side of the planet appear no further away than if they were observing their targets through the sights of an assault rifle. Although the distance between warrior and target has reached its
physical limit (on this planet anyway), the subjective distance between the two is rapidly closing.

This trend will continue for the foreseeable future as sensors rapidly improve in response to the need to limit noncombatant casualties—a need that is a condition of military success for a mature democracy like the United States in a world increasingly “leveled” by information technology. It is not hard to imagine the day when drones are the size of a wasp, transmit both color video and audio feeds, and hover a few feet away from human targets before entering their bodies. When this happens, there may be little to subjectively distinguish the combat experience of a drone operator and that, say, of a G.I. during World War II who stuck his bayonet in the guts of an enemy soldier.

In his 1995 book, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, the psychologist and former infantry officer, David Grossman, contended that the closer a warrior is to the person they are killing, the greater their natural resistance to killing and the greater the risk of sustaining a psychological injury. The least resistance is felt by those whose actions kill people who cannot be seen, such as aircrews and artillerymen. Inner resistance gradually increases from those who kill with long-range weapons (sniper fire and missiles), then mid-range weapons (assault rifles), then hand-grenades, then close-range weapons (pistols), and, finally, those who kill in hand-to-hand combat (bayonets and knives).

A modern phrase (albeit embodying an ancient concept) captures the reason for the psychological effect that Grossman describes – ‘moral injury’. It refers to the difficulty that warriors may have reconciling their actions when deployed with the personal identity they inhabit at home. In peacetime, there are few things more taboo than killing and harming others as well as destroying others’ property and livelihoods. In war, such deeds are not crimes; they are, within certain parameters, encouraged and even expected. If warriors are especially gifted at doing what are considered, outside of war, to be heinous crimes, they may receive the nation’s highest awards for valor. The national mood might even hailed them as ‘heroes’.

Classical and contemporary literature is replete with tales of public heroes being haunted by private remorse; of their struggling to see goodness in themselves, their comrades, or their community; and of their descent into a range of self-destructive behaviors, even suicide. Jonathan Shay, the psychiatrist who popularized the term “moral injury” and who has worked extensively with Vietnam War veterans, wrote that “moral injury” is the perceived violation
of ‘what’s right’—and that it, was the life-threatening, adrenalin-charged, fear-based dimensions of the events typically associated with PTSD, produces the most harmful and enduring personal impact on combat veterans.3

Due to the frequency with which they witness and dispense death and destruction, it may be that those most susceptible to moral injury are drone pilots and operators. The evidence pointing to this as yet tentative conclusion is consistent with my own experience. During my career as an intelligence officer, I never took aim at another human being and pulled the trigger. Nonetheless, those under my command provided intelligence that prompted operations in which people were killed. But I never witnessed first-hand any of these deaths although, in a sense, I was directly complicit in the killing.

There were several occasions, however, when I witnessed other units killing groups of ISIS fighters via drones.

The image of those dead fighters haunt me still. Yes, I believed (and still believe) that their deaths were a tragic necessity and the much lesser of two evils. And, yes, the feeling of being remote from the killing protected me psychologically to some extent. I was not confronted by the graphic sights, sounds and smells of battle. I did not look into anyone’s eyes as they died. I was, in effect, sipping reality through a straw. But no matter how diluted these combat experiences were, I could not escape the knowledge that those small, lit figures on green-tinted screens whom my colleagues were dismembering with high explosive munitions, who in some cases were running, falling, crawling away from the points of missile impact, were human beings like me. They were, in my judgment, deeply deluded human beings that had to be prevented from committing further atrocities. But they were human beings who death would be mourned by families and friends.
While troubling, my experiences and the mental images associated with armed conflict do not keep me awake at night. They probably would haunt me if I had seen the faces of those killed and wounded - up close and personal – if I had been the one firing the missiles or had witnessed these combat actions routinely rather than casually. Also, adding to the cognitive dissonance of such events for the drone operator/warrior is, I suspect, the sudden transition between their civilian and battlefield lives, not just once but over and over again. Is it really any wonder that drone warriors can struggle to reconcile their wartime and peacetime personas when, a couple hours before they might take their kids to soccer games, they were remotely but effectively killing other human beings?

Moral injury is not mentioned in the bible of the mental health community, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Health Disorders (DSM). I suspect its exclusion relates to the reticence of behavioral scientists to venture into the professional realm of philosophers and theologians. Consequently, like the rest of the U.S. military, the U.S Air Force (USAF) does not systemically collect data on this particular unseen wound. Instead, the USAF collects data on conditions mentioned in the DSM, such as PTSD. None the less, the statistics that the USAF has published thus far on drone warriors appears to support the idea that drone operators/warriors are especially vulnerable to moral injury. For example, a December 2011 survey of 900 drone pilots and operators revealed that 4 per cent were at high risk of developing PTSD. This is a curious observation given that drone warriors do not face any life-threatening danger. It is difficult to imagine their being affected by any trauma other than moral trauma. This USAF report also stated that 25 per cent of Global Hawk operators and 17 per cent of Predator and Reaper pilots suffer from clinical distress which was defined as “anxiety, depression, or stress severe enough to affect an operator’s job performance or family life”. Importantly, these are the same symptoms linked to moral injury.

The data suggests that Grossman’s theorem needs to be revised: it is not the physical distance between warriors and their human targets that principally determines their degree of vulnerability to psychological injury; it is the subjective distance that really matters. The likely presence of moral injury among drone warriors suggests that the USAF may be ‘missing the forest for the trees’ by failing to recognize the character of the unseen wounds suffered by the drone warriors. This matters because the real injury may go undetected and unaddressed.
The idea that history operates on a series of cycles is not new. Hindus have long believed this. More recently, the hugely popular Zager and Evans song released in 1968 ‘In the Year 2525’ claimed that civilization was advancing technologically only to arrive at its starting point. This notion is consistent with what we are observing of the unseen wounds suffered by those who have seen armed conflict and been deployed as peacekeepers since 1990 when the Cold War ended and asymmetrical warfare became the norm. America’s remote-control warriors will soon be able to look people in the eyes when they kill them. Their experience will not be too dissimilar from the caveman and his rock.

Americans want to believe that the wars they fight are right and that, in just wars, uniformed personnel can kill their adversaries without suffering physically and psychologically. This myth – and it is a myth – is reflected in the desire to separate warriors from warfare through the application of superior technology. They can kill without physically standing on the battlefield and so avoid the stresses and strains that go with delivering destructive force with lethal intent. But unless we turn our warriors into psychopaths devoid of conscience (a cure far worse than the ailment inoculated against), we can be sure of one reality: the human cost of sheltered, remote-controlled warfare will never be as cheap or as convenient as it might have seemed.

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3 Jonathan Shay, Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994, 20. Shay writes: “Moral injury is an essential part of any combat trauma that leads to lifelong psychological injury. Veterans can usually recover from horror, fear, and grief once they return to civilian life, so long as ‘what’s right’ has not also been violated.”
Moral Injury and Identity

Brad Allenby

One of the reasons moral injury is difficult to understand and perhaps more difficult to mitigate is the damage it inflicts to a person’s identity, by which I mean combination of qualities, and psychological, institutional, social and cultural experiences and frameworks, which define an individual through time. Identity marks us as both individual human beings, different from others, and also as members of groups, be they citizens of a particular nation, members of a family, clan, or tribe, or believers in particular religious formulations. Most people consist of networks of different identities – cultural, gender, national, tribal, online personas, family role, employment or calling, and many others – which shift in strength and relationship to each other over time.

Identity matters because it is the cause and the consequence of meaning. Joining any military involves important changes to identity and meaning. In fact, those changes are central to the
process of turning civilians into combatants. As anyone who has ever served in the armed forces knows, a large part of basic training is not the explicit education about tactics, weapons, and military institutions but an intentional process designed to create a warrior identity. Young civilians with widely varying backgrounds, experiences, and beliefs are changed. After basic training they are no longer civilians. This is the first step in their identity transformation. Civilians are ‘others’ and they are not one of them. Using everything from homogenous haircuts, the assembly line medical and paperwork processing system, the lack of privacy in the barracks and bathrooms, the regimented day, the well thought out psychological structure of boot camp, they are turned into dependable components of a unit where the mission, not individual fulfillment, is the primary value, even at the cost of human life.

The warrior identity thus created, while quite different from vastly heterogeneous civilian identities that characterize any society, cannot be entirely new. There are some continuing strands of identity and, therefore, of meaning that survive basic training – indeed, there must be. If the warrior identity is going to be effective, it must grow from, and align with, the identities already inherent in its incoming civilians, and the narratives that support civil society. In other words, the warrior identity is a design space. Yet, it is inherently constrained and its boundaries are restricted by what warriors from a particular country, culture, and historical period will accept as valid given their background, international laws and norms, and relevant institutional, social, and cultural contexts. Country of origin matters and nationality is important.

Given the functions that warriors must perform, including killing others in the service of their country, the warrior identity generally must be simple, strong, and unambiguous. Conversely, the example of Ajax and the “thousand-yard stare” from Sophocles’ play that was mentioned in the first piece in this White Paper suggests, the devastation and chaos associated with armed conflict have often proven destructive and corrosive of the warrior’s identity in practice. Moral injury – “a debilitating psychological or spiritual damage resulting
from transgression of deeply held moral beliefs and expectations” – arises when the distance between lived experience and identity becomes too great, and internal guilt and shame, frequently unexpressed to others, undermine both the warrior identity, and the personal identity that individuals always carry with them. Moral injury is essentially a failure of identity in which an individual’s sense of themselves cannot encompass military experiences, especially in the brutal domain of combat, and especially given the many unfamiliar cultures within which warriors of a superpower must often operate. In this respect, the American experience will differ from those of the United States’ friends and allies.

This might be especially true when very different forms of combat, perhaps combined with different cultural and ethical frameworks, are juxtaposed. While the Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan experience might be the most obvious examples, there are others. Consider, for example, the French experience in Algeria in the 1950s and 1960s. French officers such as Roger Trinquier provided a comprehensive and sophisticated analysis of the terrorist organisation Front de Liberation Nationale (FLN), and a roadmap for successful counter-terrorism activities. Notably, Trinquier proposed using tactics such as torture and summary executions. The technical analysis was vindicated. By the summer of 1957 the French had won the Battle of Algiers and the FLN was in ruins. But the soft power/moral injury blowback from the techniques used by the French undermined the legitimacy of French rule in Algeria. The result was not just an unsustainable form of combat for the French but an individual and collective cultural moral injury. The domestic consequences was that the French government of the Fourth Republic collapsed.

Were the French held to a different standard than the FLN? Absolutely – just as NATO and the Americans are held to a different standard than ISIS, or the Taliban, or the militias in sub-Saharan Africa, or the Russians in Syria. This is neither surprising nor unfair. Rather, it represents a profound recognition of the strength of culture, narrative, and identity itself. A French citizen and warrior is not an FLN terrorist. To go too far in that direction will not just destroy the warrior through moral injury but the civil culture in whose name the warrior serves. That’s one reason the continuing debate in the United States about torture is so charged. The dispute is not really about torture, it is about culture and identity. “We don’t do that” remains one of the most powerful red lines for any American warrior. The collective identity, that I am an American, restrains action because it reflects values that are defining. Violate those core values
too deeply, and moral injury to the individual, and if it is systematic, the culture, will inevitably follow. Relativism fails as an option not because it is unethical (although it might well be). It fails because it doesn’t work: humans, their institutions, and their cultures are not built that way.

There are a number of reasons why the linkages among moral injury, identity, and modern military and security doctrines and strategies may be particularly potent and problematic at this point in our history. One is operational: the dramatic increase in mission complexity involved in modern combat is putting new and challenging stresses on warriors, some of which inevitably threaten the strong identity that envelopes them. A purely combat role is difficult enough. Today’s warriors, however, are often faced with multiple and very different missions. Combat is profoundly different from peacekeeping which in turn is different from nation-building. Each mission requires not just different techniques, training, and technology. There is a need for very different personal psychology and behavior patterns. It requires, in other words, a different identity. The different psychologies and cultures required by these varied missions can be learned. They can also conflict with each other and provide significantly greater risk of moral injury.

Moreover, identity is becoming part of a much larger and very different battlespace. American dominance in conventional military capability has forced its potential adversaries towards alternative strategies generally grouped under the classification of “asymmetric warfare”. Chinese doctrine has evolved towards “Unrestricted Warfare”, understood to be the substitution of conflict across all domains of an adversary’s culture, from infrastructure to finance to entertainment, for conventional force. Russia has adopted a similar strategy variously called “Hybrid Warfare” or “New Generation Warfare,” described by General Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Federation, as involving “a tendency toward blurring the lines between the states of war and peace” so that “the focus of applied methods of conflict has altered in the direction of the broad use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other nonmilitary measures – applied in coordination with the protest potential of the population.” Valery Korovin, a Russian theorist, explained in 2008 that in “the postmodern age, the most important weapon in conquering a state and establishing control over it has become its own society.” This form of conflict has been effectively deployed in Crimea, in Eastern Ukraine, in interference with Western electoral processes including the American presidential election and the Brexit vote, and is currently being practiced by Russia against European governments, especially in Eastern Europe.
For those concerned with moral injury, there are two important things to note about these strategies. First, they have been reasonably successful. To date, the West has no creative response to Russian weaponized narrative, for example, and China has managed to steal vast amounts of commercially and militarily valuable technology and data. Second, the focus on narrative and psychological manipulation of adversary populations that is part of civilizational warfare directly engages social, cultural, and personal identities. If narrative can be weaponized against civilian identities, can it also be used against military personnel by, for example, increasing the possibility and potential severity of moral injury? I think it can and has been.

More broadly, the shift towards civilizational warfare is occurring at a time when other institutional changes are challenging simple conceptualizations of identity. For example, modern conflict from cyber to low level, even non-geographic, insurgencies is characterized by the privatization of war through increased use of contractors of all types, the injection of intelligence agencies into conflict zones, and the rise of violent and informal non-state actors such as ISIS. This puts individuals who are not operating under military law and who not trained warriors into combat environments alongside those who are. Similarly, the different laws and institutional codes that individuals performing the same function might fall under while performing their duties introduce a moral ambiguity that in combat environments can easily enhance moral injury. For instance, the same drone in the same airspace might be operating under different norms and laws depending on whether it is being operated by a traditional military force, an intelligence agency, a private contractor, or a non-state actor, each of whom could be representing different institutional interests with different values. Each ‘operator’ sees their actions in a different light because their identities are different.

Technological change is also challenging identity and raising the possibility of weaponising narratives at the individual level. Warriors and military institutions are information processing mechanisms. We have not traditionally seem them in this light but they are. Therefore, the potential impacts of dramatic increases in the velocity, volume and variety of information should not be trivialized. Eric Schmidt, the former CEO of Google, famously noted in 2010 that every two days
human beings create as much information as they did throughout recorded history until 2003. Facebook was founded 12 years ago and has some 2 billion active users. Twitter was founded 10 years ago and has over 325 million active users. Watson, a very sophisticated expert AI system, beat the humans at Jeopardy in 2011. AlphaGo using a more general technology and self-learning capabilities beat the world champion in Go, Lee Sedol, in 2016 and at the 2017 Future of Go Summit, defeated Ke Jie (then ranked the world’s No.1 player), in a three-game match. Not even experts had expected the latter result for another decade or so. It is a futile exercise in ignoring reality not to recognize that such profound changes across virtually all information environments and technologies will inevitably change human cognition, identity, culture, and institutions – and warfare. Manipulation of individual identity, already claimed by firms such as Cambridge Analytica, is not far off. These developments substantially increase the potential for weaponizing moral injury, especially against “moral high ground” cultures such as the United States, Australia, Britain and Canada.

Given that moral injury is largely an information-based wound, foundational changes in information volume and velocity have significant implications for both the incidence and the severity of the moral injury inflicted upon individuals and societies. The wound is inflicted and the injury is sustained when the framework that is a warrior’s identity is overwhelmed with contradictory information, eventually leading not just to confusion but to destruction of the framework. With that, the warrior loses identity, meaning, and a narrative that makes order out of conflict, combat, and death. The warrior suffers moral injury and it is debilitating.

To be clear, then, moral injury is not just a threat to warriors that for both ethical and operational reasons must be addressed. It is a potential weapon lying on the ground, waiting for our adversaries to pick up and use against us. Understanding and managing issues of narrative and identity become critical military capabilities, therefore, not just to mitigate moral injury and maintain an effective fighting force. More subtly, this understanding is the basis for successfully managing new modes of conflict supported by new technologies. Some countries may be able to avoid having to grapple with these challenges, at least for a while. The United States, as the world’s only hegemonic power, cannot.

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What Is To Be Done?

*Brad Allenby with Tom Frame*

We have described the existence of moral injury and its recent evolution as an explanatory tool. What, then, is to be done in response to its existence? This document strongly suggests that the state of knowledge and the progress of research at this point is not yet adequate to outline a systemic response to the challenges of moral injury. Nonetheless, it is also apparent that many today are already suffering from moral and psychological damage induced by deployed military service in today’s rapidly changing, highly complex, geopolitical and technological environment. Accordingly, we have decided to close by suggesting a few steps which, while certainly not comprehensive, might nevertheless serve to help mitigate moral injury in the shorter term.

Any reasonably serious attempt to address moral injury must begin with the observation that the tools, techniques, context, and complexity of current conflicts have combined to create challenges
for military and security organizations and their members that are different in kind, not just degree, from past conditions. Identity of the warrior at a personal level is a complex product of cultural mores, belief systems, and military training, and narratives at an institutional and social level. A strong warrior identity is particularly important in a high stress, high performance domain such as military operations, but has not entirely evolved to keep pace with the demands proliferating and increasingly stringent current environments generate. The result is not just a proliferation of moral injury, but also a new and exploitable military weakness with the potential to become a long-term deficiency in American, Australian, and British ability of project national power.

Our first observation is, therefore, that moral injury is not only a serious issue requiring respect and mitigation at the individual level; it constitutes a systemic challenge that demands institutional responses. Inability to adapt to profoundly different value systems on the part of individual warriors becomes not just an exploitable weakness; it is a growing threat to mission success and a continuing liability for the entire society in terms of continuing veteran care.

Our second general observation follows from the first: identity and moral injury domains are not static, especially in the post 1990, internet, social media era. This implies that specific prescriptions may be of limited value given that the risk of obsolescence is high. But it also means that more regular discussion of such issues, including active duty warriors, commanders, and pastoral and health care professionals, is an important goal in itself. This is especially compelling when we are reminded that military cultures for security and other reasons tend to place a high value on limited communication, especially if any implication of weakness might exist. In this case, however, more open and frank discussion is part of the solution and lack of communication is harmful.

Despite these difficulties there are possible mitigation strategies that can be developed in the nearer term with potential practical value. These strategies fall into three categories: actions that can be taken prior to exposure to combat; actions that can be taken during deployment and active duty; and actions that can be taken upon transition to civilian status.

**Before Deployment**

Because we know that moral injury is often a result of damage to an individual’s sense of identity, and that transitioning an individual from civilian to military status requires, among other things,
creation of a “military identity” that supersedes the pre-existing civilian persona, it follows that the creation of a resilient warrior identity should be elevated to an explicit military design objective, to be addressed during military recruitment, training, and operations. It should be treated as a strategic asset that is no different from other resources available in the conduct of military operations. It may be, for example, that some personality types are more resistant to stresses that in others might result in moral injury, raising the possibility that these individuals could be assigned to warfighting roles, while others might be more suitable to support and sustainment assignments. We do not mean to suggest, of course, that training not be done within the constraints of, and consistent with, current American, Australian, and British culture and values. After all, those values and their expression in action, including in combat, are themselves a potent source of soft power.

Moreover, within the practical constraints of the military mission and environment, civilians entering uniformed service should be trained to become more psychologically flexible and adaptive warriors, without lowering ethical standards or condoning simplistic cultural relativism. Warriors need strong values given that killing other human beings is one of the things they may be required to do. Inflexible psychologies are more prone to break, rather than adapt, when challenged at the limits. One way to enhance warrior flexibility for example, might be to train warriors to think of themselves in the dual role of warrior and problem-solver. The advantage of a “problem solver” psychology is that it can enable individuals to maintain strong personal values alongside the warrior identity while also being able to work with very different, often conflicting, perspectives. Treating other, sometimes conflicting, worldviews as a part of an external problem that warriors need to solve rather than an implicit challenge to identify, can enable warriors to work with challenging cultures in a less stressful way. Another benefit in taking this approach is that it better prepares warriors for the many, often conflicting roles they are expected to perform in the conflict environments in which contemporary operations are conducted, including peacekeeping and the restoration of civil authority.

**During Deployment**

The strong tendency within military units, especially those engaged in combat, against discussing anything that might suggest weakness is not just obsolete, but increasingly dysfunctional if not damaging. Rather, continuing and effective communication regarding these issues at the

individual and institutional level should be regarded as an absolute necessity because it has both prophylactic benefits, such as helping individuals cope when faced with disturbing situations, and strategic benefits, because narratives and identity domains are being weaponized by adversaries and Western militaries need to be aware of how they can be best countered. The effectiveness of communication in mitigating and alleviating moral injury (although they do not use that term) is emphasized by, among others, Karl Marlantes in *What It Is Like To Go To War*, while some veterans have founded organizations, such as Gallant Few in the United States and Soldier On in Australia, that encourage discussion among veterans, especially those who have served in elite units and/or seen combat, and between veterans and civilian organizations.

To the extent that moral injury usually (and incorrectly) viewed as PTSD, has been addressed in operational environments, it has generally been regarded as the responsibility of pastoral and health care professionals. This is inadequate and potentially harmful because it implies that moral injury is tangential to deployed duties and is dysfunctional. There will be instances in which the absence of a moral injury would suggest moral indifference to things that ought to shake the value system of an individual. More injury is not dysfunction. It is, alongside physical injury, an inevitable outcome of much deployed service. For this reason, responsibility for being aware of, and mitigating moral injury needs to be made a command responsibility. Given that operational service, especially in combat units, is inherently morally confrontational, and that deployed personnel need to develop moral resilience as a component of their individual operational readiness, it should be clear that all levels of command need to contribute to mitigation efforts. Moreover, since the political and cultural systems of US, Australia, and the UK all place their militaries under civilian leadership in the form of political leaders and departmental officials, civil society also must accept responsibility for moral injury and its mitigation.
After Deployment

Perhaps the single most important post-deployment mitigation strategy is public recognition for what returning military personnel may have experienced, appreciation that they have participated in morally unsettling activities and calm acceptance that some have been morally injured as a result. Although the somewhat facile greeting “thank you for your service” and the well-meaning ‘welcome home parades’ are infinitely preferable to the public rejection of Vietnam veterans, more active and nuanced steps would be preferable. These initiatives must address the reality of moral injury and involve families and community organizations as well as government and military institutions. In sum, there needs to be greater transparency in dealing with what is a complex moral and psychological phenomenon, including developing the capability to differentiate reliably between moral injury from other non-physical injuries incurred during operational service, and the application of greater rigor in the diagnosis of PTSD to reduce the likelihood of moral injury being confused with PTSD.

In addition to more vigorous efforts to treat moral injury through organizations such as the U.S. Veterans Administration and the Australian Department of Veterans Affairs, enhanced support for community veteran support groups is critical. For many veterans suffering from moral injury, including those who have been involved in humanitarian relief and peacekeeping missions, it is difficult to speak with civilian, pastoral, or health groups who have never been exposed to the pressures of combat or civil order and yet, sharing of personal experiences with those who have had similar experiences is critical to initiating communication. This process should ideally be institutionalized and initiated prior to discharge. An explicit part of this process should be to locate appropriate veterans support groups for each individual.

Information and knowledge should also be provided to community and family welfare groups, especially those seeking to care for returned personnel. Such communities of family and friends can help each other cope, as well as work with returning personnel; the degree to which not just veterans but their families deal with difficult issues and behaviors is generally unrecognized in our larger societies, which have to a considerable extent decoupled from any real experience with, or knowledge of, military activities.

Finally, militaries have spent a great deal of time and effort designing programs which turn
civilians into warriors. Everything from standardized haircuts and uniforms to basic training techniques to segregated housing for recruits is planned to create a new identity from myriads of incoming different civilian identities. Yet there is almost no effort at the discharge stage to help the warrior segue back into a civilian identity that will help them to readjust in a less structured, less disciplined, and often less intense environment. In many cases, these efforts need not be elaborate – for those who serve in the tail rather than in the tooth, for example, a relatively simple rite of passage would suffice. But for those returning from combat, it is a more complex transition, and a more elaborate passage from warrior to civilian would not only be entirely appropriate, but would create healthier adjustments.

**Conclusion**

It is unlikely that moral injury in war will ever be avoided or its affects ameliorated completely. Reducing the risk of moral injury entirely is an impossible goal. It might even be an undesirable one if the result is to evade the deep moral questions that any commitment of lethal force by a society should raise. But it is also apparent that many individuals and their families, and the military as a whole, are unnecessarily damaged by moral injury, and that there may well be prophylactic or mitigating actions that could, and should, be taken in the short term to limit the incidence and reduce the severity of the injuries that are incurred. The processes of understanding the causes of moral injury and programs that deal with the consequences of moral injury provide a critical perspective and a compassionate response given the increasing centrality of identity and narrative in modern conflict.

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Suggested readings on Moral Injury

As an aid for those seeking further information, we provide the following annotated bibliography. Because of the multidisciplinary and somewhat ambiguous definition of “moral injury,” and the dynamic state of the relevant literature, any such list is necessarily neither comprehensive nor complete, and we apologize to those whose work we have inadvertently omitted. Moreover, the reader should apply the same caution to our comments, which are merely our observations, and may reflect our perspectives and approach. We thank Doug Pryor, who prepared the document upon which this list is based.

• Robert Emmet Meagher and Douglas A. Pryor, eds., War and Moral Injury: A Reader (To be published by Wipf & Stock, Eugene, Oregon, 2017), provides a good, and broad, introduction to the topic of moral injury. In some ways, as a rapidly developing and not yet tightly defined concept, edited volumes with the different perspectives offer a better introduction to moral injury than books written by individuals, which reflect not just particular personal perspectives, but also particular disciplinary perspectives.

• Tom Frame, ed., Moral Injury: Unseen Wounds in an Age of Barbarism (published by University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2015). Not only is this an excellent anthology in itself, but because it reflects an Australian perspective on moral injury, it is the first real exploration of moral injury outside an American perspective. It is thus a doubly valuable resource.

• Karl Marlantes, What It Is Like To Go To War (published by Atlantic Monthly Press, New York, 2011). Although it does not use the term “moral injury” at all, this is a searing and honest exploration of what it feels like, written by a Marine officer veteran based on his Vietnam War experiences. It is particularly powerful because it addresses the huge experiential and psychological gap between the warrior who experiences combat, and the civilian society that sent him there.

• Peter Marin, “Living in Moral Pain,” originally published in Psychology Today in Nov 1981, Although Marin refers to “moral pain” rather than “moral injury,” the concept is essentially the same. This essay is considered one of the foundational pieces on moral injury.

• Jonathan Shay, Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character, 1994. Also, Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming, 2002. These two books put “moral injury” on the map, popularizing the term. Dr. Shay is a psychologist who, while working for the Veterans Administration, treated hundreds of Vietnam War veterans. These two books plumb Horner and scores of personal anecdotes to describe the psychological states of combat veterans. Must reads.

• Edward Tick, War and the Soul: Healing Our Nation’s Veterans from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, 2005, and Warriors Return: Restoring the Soul after War, 2014. Like Dr. Shay, Dr. Tick is a psychologist who has worked with hundreds of Vietnam War veterans. Like Dr. Shay, Dr. Tick does not distinguish moral injury from PTSD, classifying moral injury as another source of trauma—“moral trauma.” Healing and ritual are important topics for Dr. Tick.

• Robert Meagher, Herakles Gone Mad: Rethinking Heroism in an Age of Endless War, 2006. Dr. Meagher, a former Catholic priest, is one of Australia’s leading classical scholars. Herakles
Gone Mad contains the definitive translation of Euripides’ play about Herakles returning from combat (his nine labors), going temporarily insane, and his killing his wife and children. It also contains a terrific long interpretive essay that makes the play relevant to the modern reader. His most recent book is Killing from the Inside Out: Moral Injury and Just War, 2014.

- Tyler Boudreau, Packing Inferno: The Unmaking of a Marine, 2008. This is one of a host of combat memoirs that can be viewed as case studies on moral injury. In his conclusion, former Marine Capt. Boudreau criticizes society for failing to learn from literature about the moral injuries of veterans. He also argues that it’s easier for the American public to accept that veterans are suffering due to their own deficiencies rather than because of a nation’s collective decisions regarding when, where, why, and how they are going to wage war.

- Nancy Sherman, The Untold War: Inside the Hearts, Minds, and Souls of Our Soldiers, 2010. As a practicing philosopher and trained psychologist, Dr. Sherman brings a unique, unified approach to the concept. Although she doesn’t mention “moral injury,” she essentially describes it and several types of moral injury (such as “survivor’s guilt”). Also, Afterwar: Healing the Moral Wounds of Our Soldiers, 2015. In Afterwar, Dr. Sherman not only specifically mentions and describes “moral injury”; the healing of moral wounds is the focus of the book.

- Peter French’s essay, “The Two-Collar War,” in the book War and Moral Dissonance, 2010. French is a philosopher, and this essay is by far the most concrete, powerful essay in the book. It derives from French’s experiences teaching chaplains. The title refers to the inner conflict some chaplains may feel between God and Caesar—their religious faith and secular military duty.

- Joshua E. S. Phillips, None of Us Were Like This Before: American Soldiers and Torture, 2010. Phillips tells the story of soldiers at a small jail in Iraq who tortured their detainees and how guilt over their deeds later tortured them. When they returned home, many of these soldiers struggled with drugs and alcohol, insomnia, high blood pressure, depression, keeping jobs, and suicidal thoughts. They told Phillips that what bothered them the most was their feelings of guilt. Two of them eventually died under circumstances their friends and families believe was suicide.

- Rita Nakashima Brock and Gabriella Lettini, Soul Repair: Recovering from Moral Injury after War, 2012. Brock and Lettini are theologians; Brock is co-founder of the “Soul Repair Center” at Brite Divinity School. Essential reading for chaplains.

- Shira Maguen and Brett Litz, “Moral Injury in Veterans of War”, PTSD Research Quarterly, 2012. This is an excellent summary of the mental health literature most relevant to moral injury.

- Douglas A. Pryer, “Moral Injury and the American Soldier”, Jun 2014, and “Moral Injury and Military Suicide”. Due to length, Cicero Magazine broke this essay into two parts. The Early Bird recommended it as one of its “Top Five Stories” of the day, and it has received high marks from many of the experts mentioned in this bibliography.

- LTC Bill Edmonds, God Is Not Here: A Soldier’s Struggle with Torture, Trauma, and the Moral Injuries of War, 2015. This is the poignant, painful story of a Special Forces soldier who watched Iraqis torturing Iraqis. It is helpful in understanding the difference between PTSD and moral injury.

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**Moral Injury: Towards an International Perspective**

Moral Injury is a debilitating psychological or spiritual damage resulting from transgression of deeply held moral beliefs and expectations.

It is damaging our warriors and families and friends.

It is damaging our communities and it is damaging the societies that sent them to war.

Even as we work to understand it better, we know we can reduce its costs and impacts now.