

Diagnosing the Invisible Wounds of War: An Exploration Into the Nature, Causes, and Symptoms of Moral Injury

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Here is a story
to break your heart.¹

Mary Oliver
"Lead"

War is hell, but that's not the half of it, because war is also mystery and terror and adventure and courage and discovery and holiness and pity and despair and longing and love. War is nasty; war is fun. War is thrilling; war is drudgery. War makes you a man; war makes you dead.²

Tim O'Brien
The Things They Carried

War has been a constant presence throughout the history of humankind. Many of the most notable ancient texts include, or even focus on, the problem of war and its effects on those who participate in it. This includes Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and Sun Tzu's *The Art of*

¹ Mary Oliver, "Lead" in *New and Selected Poems*, vol. 2 (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005), 54.

² Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (New York: Broadway Books, 1998), 80.

War. Even today, there is no shortage of literature or films that focus on war. One of the effects of war, which can be seen in both ancient and contemporary texts, is moral injury. However, moral injury has only been isolated and explored in detail in the recent past. Most work on the subject has been written since the United States invaded Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003. Complicated and difficult to understand fully, much less heal, moral injury plagues far too many military personnel and veterans, and it must be addressed. If moral injury is ever to be healed, it must first be understood in terms of causes and symptoms.

The aim of this exploration is to provide a definition and an ideal type of moral injury. Three distinct causes for moral injury will be proposed, all with roots in the military system and society. With this, the effects, or symptoms, of moral injury will be explored in relationship to the causes. Finally, the next steps in the study of moral injury will be discussed. The reason for this study is to lay groundwork for future scholarship on the subject. A solution cannot exist for a problem that is unidentified, which means that healing moral injury is not possible until the nature of it is understood.

Although it is a phenomenon as old as war itself, the study of moral injury is still in its infancy. Because of this, it is beneficial to develop an ideal type for moral injury. When developing an ideal type, it is important to remember that each individual and each case of moral injury is different. However, common symptoms can still be observed between cases. Those who suffer from moral injury often claim that they had their humanity stripped from them. The first

way that this occurs is through becoming machine. Soldiers³ are trained to follow orders and to rely on training instincts in battle; yet orders and instincts do not always obey an individual's moral conscience. Another way that soldiers lose their humanity is by taking away the humanity of their enemies, failing to recognize the humanity in others. Finally, soldiers lose their humanity through losing faith in the collective whole, or the "cause." Metaphorically, the collective whole can be referred to as "God," the unifying totem of a community or society. Soldiers often sign up for the military or war in order to become part of "God," but then then lose faith in "God" when it betrays the trust of the individual.

To explore the constant problem of war and the long existence of moral injury, I have chosen to turn to modern day studies and accounts, twentieth century war literature, and ancient texts. These have led me to develop my three causes of moral injury: becoming machine, dehumanizing the enemy, and becoming God. I am indebted to Rita Nakashima Brock and Gabriella Lettini, who are pioneers in the study of moral injury. I have drawn extensively from the primary accounts found within their book *Soul Repair*. Robert Emmet Meagher and Jonathan Shay are also pioneers in the field, and have both turned to ancient Greek texts to explain the phenomenon. Following their spirit, I have turned to ancient Hebrew texts for the same reason.

With there being little scholarship on the existence of moral injury in less recent military conflicts, it is still possible to discover

³ The term "soldier" is usually associated with members of the Army, but it will be used in a generic sense to refer to military personnel.

the symptoms and causes in the writings about those wars. I chose to use semi-autobiographical novels from the wars of the twentieth century in order to find instances of the same issues that are being discussed in modern cases of moral injury. While the specific details of action may not be completely accurate, the emotions that are portrayed in the literature are. In many cases, especially in Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* and Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, it is not uncommon for war participants to express their experiences through semi-fictional writing. The following excerpt from *The Things They Carried* illustrates the value found in this type of literature:

Telling stories seemed a natural, inevitable process, like clearing the throat. Partly catharsis, partly communication, it was a way of grabbing people by the shirt and explaining what had happened to me, how I'd allowed myself to be dragged into a wrong war, all the mistakes I'd made, all the terrible things I had seen and done.

I did not look on my work as therapy, and still don't. Yet when I received Norman Bowker's letter, it occurred to me that the act of writing had led me through a swirl of memories that might otherwise have ended in paralysis or worse. By telling stories, you objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself. You pin down certain truths. You make up others. You start sometimes with an incident that truly happened, like the night in the shit field, and you carry it forward by inventing incidents that did not in fact occur but that nonetheless help to clarify and explain.⁴

⁴ Ibid., 158.

Along with war literature, the Hebrew Bible will be examined to show how the nature of war has not changed over time, specifically regarding the ways in which society functions in war. Joshua and his use of wartime propaganda look very similar to the ways in which war propaganda functions today. Saul, the first king of Israel, will also be examined as an example of going against popular patriotic fervor and belief. In the Judeo-Christian-Muslim scriptures and Roman mythology, civilization was born out of fratricide. Because of this, ancient writings of war still contain extremely valuable information on the nature of humanity and violence.

Hopefully, through this exploration into moral injury, it will become clear that this is not a new issue at all. Killing and participation in war have always had moral effects on the participants. Addressing the effects of war on the morality of the individual is a frontier that should have been explored long ago. It is now time to address the issue, so that humanity as a whole will be able to move forward.

What is Moral Injury?

It is a pain that redefined my life, and that not only transformed who I was, but continues to transform me.⁵

Camilo Mejía in *Soul Repair*

⁵ Camilo Mejía, quoted in Rita Nakashima Brock and Gabriella Lettini, *Soul Repair: Recovery from Moral Injury after War* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), 88.

Generally stated, moral injury is a phenomenon in which a soldier, or an individual, has an intense sense of anger, guilt, or shame when he or she is able to reflect consciously and cognitively on participation and experiences in war. These reflections cause individuals to feel as if their humanity has been stripped from them. Losing one's humanity results from a mixture of becoming part of the military machine, dehumanizing the enemy, and losing trust in the authorities and the collective whole that decided to engage in war. The realization of having violated a personal moral code comes at different times and with varying intensities of angst for each individual. This attributes to one of the most difficult characteristics of moral injury: no two cases or experiences are the same.

Moral injury is most often spoken about in conjunction with post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD. Until recently, moral injury was either considered to be a synonym to or a symptom of PTSD. However, moral injury can be and should be considered a separate issue. According to Rita Nakashima Brock and Gabriella Lettini, co-founders of the Soul Repair Center at Brite Divinity School, "PTSD occurs in response to prolonged, extreme trauma and in a fear-victim reaction to danger."⁶ They go on to explain that PTSD "produces hormones that affect the brain's amygdala and hippocampus, which control responses to fear, as well as regulate emotions and connect fear to memory."⁷ An individual with PTSD will often have difficulty remembering traumatic events, if they can be recalled at all. Because

⁶ Brock and Lettini, *Soul Repair*, xiii.

⁷ Ibid.

PTSD prevents coherent memories, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, for an individual to reflect on his/her actions. This directly contradicts the concept of moral injury.

Moral injury, on the other hand, is the phenomenon that occurs when an individual is able to reflect consciously and thoughtfully on his/her participation in war. Moral injury cannot occur without this conscious reflection, which PTSD often inhibits. It is possible for the same person to suffer from moral injury and PTSD, however, because moral injury can arise when the symptoms of PTSD are alleviated or “relieved enough for a person to construct a coherent memory of his or her experience.”⁸ When an individual reflects on war participation and experiences and finds that he/she has “transgressed one’s basic moral identity and violated core moral beliefs,” this leads to intense feelings of anger, guilt, and shame. This is moral injury. It is not a psychological disorder; it is a normal, ethical soul or conscience in extreme anguish.

Because it is not a psychological disorder, it should be argued that the study of moral injury belongs first and foremost in the humanities. Moral injury is the effect of a healthy, functioning conscience rather than clouded judgement. Psychology is vital for understanding how the symptoms of moral injury function and affect the brain, but the humanities are best able to address the morality of the individuals and the societal causes that are at the root of moral injury. PTSD is almost exclusively addressed by the sciences and the medical field, but moral injury is of a different nature. In the coming years as the study of moral injury progresses, I expect that

⁸ Ibid.

the humanities and those in spiritual and religious communities will have the most to say on the subject.

Studying and learning about moral injury is an absolute necessity, not just for the military, but for all citizens that will have a say in whether or not a country engages in warfare. Moral injury matters because many returning soldiers find the shame and guilt associated with it impossible to live with, to the point that suicide appears to be the only way out. In the calendar year of 2014, there were 1,126 suicide attempts and 438 deaths among active personnel (both full time and reservists) in the American military.⁹ Of course, not all suicide attempts are because of moral injury, but it is a contributor to America's high veteran and military suicide rate that cannot be overlooked. Even more returning soldiers sentence themselves to personal solitude, leading to damaged relationships with others, drug addictions, alcoholism, etc. Although they return physically, those who suffer from moral injury almost never fully return to their families and love ones after the war. Moral injury must be addressed, so that sons, daughters, husbands, wives, fathers, mothers, and friends can fully return to the people that love them the most.

⁹ *Department of Defense Suicide Event Report Calendar Year 2014 Annual Report* (Washington D.C.: Department of Defense, 2016), iv-v.

Becoming Machine

It was no use worrying about the War now; I was in the Machine again, and all responsibility for my future was in the haphazard control of whatever powers manipulated the British Expeditionary Force.¹⁰

Siegfried Sassoon
Memoirs of an Infantry Officer

Military training and culture play prominent roles in the ways that soldiers feel they are stripped of their humanity by creating a “military machine.” This machine is probably essential for survival in combat; however, it should be argued that bodily survival in combat is often accompanied by the diminution of certain human traits. Most notably, the human ability to reflect and judge morally is diminished as part of the machine. Whether or not becoming machine is necessary for survival in war is an argument of a different nature. The current prevalent problem of the military machine is that soldiers struggle to return to humanity after becoming machine. As Siegfried Sassoon wrote of World War I, war is “undisguisedly mechanical and inhuman.”¹¹ This is simply the nature of war.

To prepare for combat, soldiers are taught to overcome their natural reluctance to kill. In World War II, about “75 percent of [American] combat soldiers did not fire directly at the enemy, even when their own lives were at risk.”¹² As a means to ensure victory in

¹⁰ Siegfried Sassoon, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer: The Memoirs of George Sherston* (New York: Penguin Books, 2013), 125.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 109.

¹² Brock and Lettini, *Soul Repair*, 17.

war and maintain a high survival rate, this statistic is vastly insufficient. Once military leaders found out about this statistic, they were shocked, and they began to develop new methods of training. The result is referred to as “reflexive fire training.” Reflexive fire training establishes shooting as a trained reflex, rather than a conscious or thought-out decision. These new techniques “raised shooting rates to 50 or 60 percent in Korea, and 85 to 90 percent in Vietnam.”¹³ Reflexive fire training was, and still is, successful in overcoming a human’s natural resistance to killing, by creating soldiers that are trained to kill through instinct.

In Tim O’Brien’s semi-autobiographical collection of stories about the Vietnam War and his participation in it, O’Brien includes a section titled “The Man I Killed.” In this, he discusses the feelings and thoughts that go through a soldier’s mind as he/she kills another human. In the story, a young North Vietnamese soldier was walking down a trail. Instinctually, O’Brien threw a grenade in the man’s direction. Then the young man was dead, before he had even noticed O’Brien and his fellow soldiers. O’Brien explains that the killing “was entirely automatic. I did not hate the young man; I did not see him as the enemy; I did not ponder issues of morality or politics or military duty.”¹⁴ O’Brien’s ability to choose whether or not to kill the man was taken away from him by his training, which made killing a reflex. O’Brien goes on to write about how the face of the young man, especially the “star shaped hole”¹⁵ in his head, continues to haunt him. He ponders over the possible life that the man led, what

¹³ Ibid., 18

¹⁴ O’Brien, *The Things They Carried*, 132.

¹⁵ Ibid., 124.

he could have become, and his noble reasons for fighting against the American military; he mourns over the loss of ability to choose to kill.

O'Brien is not alone in his situation. Camilo Ernesto Mejía, who participated in Operation Iraqi Freedom as an enlisted soldier, was interviewed by Brock and Lettini for *Soul Repair* on this same topic. Mejía claimed that after killing another human in war, "all he remembers is the young man standing and then lying dead in a pool of blood in the dirt. He was appalled that his ability to decide what to do had been taken away by his training."¹⁶ Furthermore, Mejía believed that the person he killed was innocent. His trained instincts forced him to go against his moral conscience. If the person had been an enemy soldier, Mejía most likely would have experienced and reflected on the killing much differently, but this is exactly the problem of reflexive fire training: instincts cannot determine a threat from an innocent bystander. When using instincts and reflexes to kill others, our military is gambling with innocent lives and the souls of its soldiers.

Along with reflexive fire training, soldiers are trained to suppress emotions in war. Since 2008, soldiers in the United States Army have been trained and evaluated in Comprehensive Soldier and Family Fitness, or CSF. This was established in order to condition soldiers to withstand the environment and effects of war before deployment. Soldiers are evaluated in five core areas: physical, social, family, emotional, and spiritual wellness. "Resilience" is one of the most prevalent terms associated with CSF,

¹⁶ Brock and Lettini, *Soul Repair*, 34.

and it applies to the emotional and spiritual components of the training and evaluation as well.¹⁷ However, with regards to the emotional and spiritual dimensions, “CSF is strikingly unconcerned about the deep moral questions posed by war, and it seems to glorify soldiers as spiritually fit who can remain unaffected in any deep moral or emotional way.”¹⁸ Military training fosters a culture in which emotions, especially sadness, grief, or doubt, are signs of weakness and vulnerability. It appears that becoming spiritually and emotionally fit is synonymous with becoming desensitized to death and killing.

In *Achilles in Vietnam*, Jonathon Shay specifically comments on the way that tears were viewed in the Vietnam War. Shay states that “American military culture in Vietnam regarded tears as dangerous but above all as demeaning, the sign of a weakling, a loser.”¹⁹ While tears made a person appear weak, the root of the tears was the true concern: feelings of grief, remorse, doubt, etc. Tears are merely physical manifestations of the emotions that exist within the soldier. Yet in war, soldiers are expected to put on a “stoic” persona in which emotions are suppressed and do not matter. Along with this expectation, emotions are thought to make a person weak. However, the stoic mentality that requires the suppression of emotions cannot

¹⁷ Brian Feeney, “Comprehensive Soldier and Family Fitness expands resilience training to Army leaders,” *www.army.mil: The Official Homepage of the United States Army*, last modified October 16, 2013, http://www.army.mil/article/113208/Comprehensive_Soldier_and_Family_Fitness_Expands_Resilience_Training_to_Army_Leaders/.

¹⁸ Brock and Lettini, *Soul Repair*, 101.

¹⁹ Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Unfolding of Character* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 63.

truly be said to allow for the fullness of humanity, because emotions are an essential aspect of the human experience. When an aspect of the human experience is not permitted, then it may appear that a part of a person's humanity has been stripped.

This suppression of human emotions in war is not a recent development. In *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, Siegfried Sassoon's semi-autobiographical novel of World War I, the fictional character George Sherston declares that the only useful emotion in war is hatred. Of his training and experiences in war, he claims that "Hatred makes one vital, and without it one loses energy. 'Keep vital' is a more important axiom than 'love your neighbor.'"²⁰ The leaders above Sherston believed that the enemy must be hated and that all other emotions must be suppressed. There is no room for remorse or grief in war; it distracts and detracts from the goal of victory. In one instance, Sherston, who constantly reflects on how his humanity is not his own, comments on how he was disappointed that he did not come into contact with any dead enemy bodies because it "might have caused a revival of human emotion."²¹ This, however, would have compromised his participation in war even more than his constant stream of doubts about the war effort.

Suppression of emotion can also be seen throughout all of Tim O'Brien's *The Things We Carried*. For example, O'Brien writes about Lieutenant Jimmy Cross, the commander of his platoon. Lt. Cross would often daydream of a girl named Martha while on patrol in the jungles of Vietnam. Martha was from his hometown and he had

²⁰ Sassoon, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, 212.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 67-68.

decided that he was in love with her. She did not love him back, yet he still kept a picture of her with him at all times. Martha, or rather the idea of Martha, served as a sexual fantasy and a sentimental connection to home for Lt. Cross. One day while on patrol, an infantryman named Ted Lavender was shot in the head while urinating. Lt. Cross held himself responsible for Lavender's death because he loved Martha. In O'Brien's words:

Lieutenant Cross felt the pain. He blamed himself...He pictured Martha's smooth young face, thinking he loved her more than anything, more than his men, and now Ted Lavender was dead because he loved her so much and could not stop thinking about her.²²

Lt. Cross's sentimentality, longing for home, and love for Martha prevented him from being an effective leader in combat. In the arena of war, there is little room for emotions of this nature because they compromise resiliency.

In another example from *The Things They Carried*, there is a glimpse of humanity within the war zone, but it is only fleeting. O'Brien briefly mentions that Ted Lavender found and adopted an orphaned puppy. He took care of the puppy by carrying it in his rucksack and feeding it with a plastic spoon. This could be considered good and natural human behavior, proof of humanity within a war zone. However, as proof that human emotions are suppressed within the military culture, another soldier "strapped [the puppy] to a Claymore antipersonnel mine and squeezed the

²² O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*, 6-7.

firing device.”²³ While a puppy is not a human, this still qualifies as numbness to death, possibly even an addiction to killing. An addiction to killing is not unusual as a side effect of becoming part of the machine. As a soldier in the present conflict in Iraq stated, “‘I don’t know if I could do another tour over here. ‘Cause the more time you spend here, the more people you wanna kill.’”²⁴

Suppression of emotion is dangerous to a person’s humanity, or their perception of the human experience. Emotions are an important aspect of being human. They help guide decisions and play a prominent role throughout a person’s life. When emotions are routinely suppressed, it can be extremely difficult for a soldier to become simply human again after war. Jonathon Shay remarks that “If military practice tells soldiers that their emotions of love and grief—which are inseparable from their humanity—*do not matter*, then the civilian society that has sent them to fight on their behalf should not be shocked by their ‘inhumanity’ when they try to return to civilian life.”²⁵ Emotions truly are inseparable from humanity, and without them, humans become much closer to machine.

The language that is used in military culture also instills a numbness to killing, death, and emotions within soldiers. O’Brien refers to the vernacular that is associated with death several times in *The Things They Carried*. He uses the term “grunt lingo” to denote the “hard vocabulary [used] to contain the terrible softness.”²⁶ Grunt

²³ Ibid., 36.

²⁴ Kevin Sites, *The Things They Cannot Say: Stories Soldiers Won’t Tell You About What They’ve Seen, Done, or Failed To Do In War* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2013), 38.

²⁵ Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*, 67.

²⁶ O’Brien, *The Things They Carried*, 20.

lingo made death less personal and less real. O'Brien explains this concept in reference to Ted Lavender's death, which occurred when he stepped off the trail to urinate.

They used a hard vocabulary to contain the terrible softness. *Greased* they'd say. *Offed, lit up, zapped while zipping*. It wasn't cruelty, just stage presence. They were actors. When someone died, it wasn't quite dying, because in a curious way it seemed scripted, and because they had their lines mostly memorized, irony mixed with tragedy, and because they called it by other names, as if to encyst and destroy the reality of death itself. They kicked corpses. They cut off thumbs. They talked grunt lingo. They told stories about Ted Lavender's supply of tranquilizers, how the poor guy didn't feel a thing, how incredibly tranquil he was.²⁷

In instances like these, language and vernacular are everything. A person is not dead unless he/she is pronounced dead. To suppress the emotions of death, it is possible for soldiers to never pronounce their fallen comrades as dead. *Greased, zapped, and kicked the bucket* do not contain the grief and sadness that would accompany a death in any other situation. According to O'Brien, "It's easier to cope with a kicked bucket than a corpse; if it isn't human, it doesn't matter much if it's dead."²⁸ When war is a play on a stage, rather than absolute reality, it is possible for death to have no sting. When death is permanent, and realized within the minds of the survivors, the sting of death is brutal and harsh. In order to cope and continue to fight, emotions cannot be allowed to interfere.

²⁷ Ibid., 20.

²⁸ Ibid., 238.

Grieving and mourning the fallen soldiers was a very important part of warfare in Homer's *The Iliad*. Both sides would call a truce in order to have proper funerals. However, modern warfare no longer stops for the dead. Especially with the amount of connection to home that the internet and telephones provide, emotions that go along with the war can easily be turned off and left unaddressed. As in the memoir *God is Not Here* by Bill Russell Edmonds, it is possible to have a conversation with a family member or loved one halfway across the world and completely turn off the grief or pain that a soldier may be experiencing as a result of war.

Amy finally got her present, a Kurdish bracelet, and luckily I'm able to get an Internet connection so I can tell her about it. We chat about the mundane irritating little notes from Wells Fargo Bank, the house refinancing. Anything other than this dusty shithole.²⁹

The soldier never has to tell the person at home what is going on. Furthermore, if the soldier does not express emotions, then the emotions are more easily suppressed and overlooked because they are never fully realized.

The most generalized characteristic of becoming machine is the loss of responsibility for one's actions. As part of the military hierarchy, a soldier is not responsible for his/her actions when following orders. Robert Emmet Meagher, a scholar of the ethics of war, states that "War issues waivers to its participants, free passes, as it were, to take each other's lives with impunity..."³⁰ Soldiers are not

²⁹ Bill Russell Edmonds, *God is Not Here: A Soldier's Struggle with Torture, Trauma, and the Moral Injuries of War* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2015), 160.

³⁰ Robert Emmet Meagher, *Killing from the Inside Out: Moral Injury and Just War* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2014), 11.

given the chance to choose or decide, they are always ordered what to do. The reflexive training that soldiers receive also serves to take away their responsibility. Soldiers are not supposed to be held responsible when their instincts make poor judgments. Rather, that is considered merely an unfortunate side effect of war. If the killing of an innocent person is even reported, the soldier simply fills out the necessary paperwork and then the death can be deemed an accident. The problem with this approach, though, is that many soldiers do not care if the killing was accidental; they care that it occurred. Although the soldier is not legally culpable, the moral conscience of the soldier often believes otherwise. The vernacular of war and the stoic, emotion-suppressed culture of the military make death and killing routine and much less significant.

In many ways, it appears that the military does try to turn its soldiers into machines—beings that can kill and still remain unaffected so that the mission can continue. This makes soldiers more effective at the most difficult parts of their jobs. Becoming machine keeps soldiers alive, yet it can damage their humanity beyond repair. It is probably true that turning soldiers into machine is done so that they may return home to their families and loved ones; however, the military must be even more concerned with the emotional and spiritual states of the soldiers returning home. Many families find that they never fully get their loved ones back after war, and they receive an empty shell of a body instead. Through addressing the problem of moral injury, especially the effects of becoming part of the military machine, it could become much more possible for soldiers to return home completely to live meaningful lives. The awareness of the machine is vital for understanding moral injury, but it is still just the beginning of the causes.

Dehumanization of the Enemy

One such mechanism is all too familiar in the history of war—namely, the use of pejorative epithets to dehumanize the enemy. The names help morph others into subhumans, whom it then becomes easier to demonize.³¹

Nancy Sherman
The Untold War

Along with becoming part of the machine, humanity is removed from war zones through the ways that the enemy is perceived. This will be referred to as the “dehumanization” of the enemy. This is mostly achieved through the language that is used to describe the enemy, which has its roots in the culture and traditions of society. The degradation of the enemy is a very ancient war tradition, dating back to the ancient Israelites and even farther back to the legends of the Trojan War. Historically, humans have found it difficult to kill other humans that could be seen as equals. Rather than deciding not to fight and kill other humans, the enemies have become non-human or subhuman in the minds of soldiers and society.

In his book *The Things They Cannot Say*, Kevin Sites interviewed an American soldier named William Wold, who was

³¹ Nancy Sherman, *The Untold War: Inside the Hearts, Minds, and Souls of Our Soldiers* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2010), 130.

deployed in Iraq in 2004. In these two excerpts from the interview, it is extremely clear that the American soldiers were not fighting humans merely defending their country and their families from outside invaders.

Kevin Sites (KS): Did you see what happened over there?

WW: Yeah, well, one of the other NCOs was just walkin' by Danger. We had security. One of these *fuckin' shitheads* just jumped out and fuckin' shot him a bunch of times. And then ran and jumped over a fuckin' wall and we couldn't get his *ass*. He got shot five or six times. The sappy plate stopped most of the rounds. One went right into his *fuckin'*...one went into his neck and the other one went into his arm.³²

KS: You had to shoot some guys today.

WW: Yeah.

KS: Was that hard to do?

WW: No. I don't have a problem shootin' *shitheads*.

KS: Have you had to do it before this?

WW: Yeah. I shot twelve guys since I've been here.

KS: Twelve guys and you just turned twenty-one?

WW: [Laughs] Yeah. I get out at twenty-one. I came in at seventeen. I graduated high school a year early to do this shit.

KS: Are you glad you did?

WW: No. If I could take it back, I wouldn't do it.

KS: Why?

WW: I'd go to college, man. College is where it's at. I'm glad I'm here defending my country, though. I'm not here for the Iraqi people. I'm here for the American people.

KS: Do a lot of guys feel the same way that you do?

WW: What's that?

³² Sites, *The Things They Cannot Say*, 32.

KS: Do you think that a lot of guys feel the same way that you do?

WW: I know that a lot of guys hate these *fuckin' shitheads*. I'm tired of seein' my brothers get hurt. I've had four of my best friends get killed since I've been here.

KS: Is it frustrating?

WW: It's extremely frustrating. Let me find that guy. They shoot us and run. They hit us with IEDs [improvised explosive devices]. They're *cowards*. That's why I don't have a problem shootin' any of them.³³

(All emphases mine)

The terms *shitheads*, *fuckin' shitheads*, and *cowards* all create an image of the enemy soldier as something far inferior to the brave, sophisticated American soldier. In military culture, all enemy soldiers are interchangeable and exactly the same. Soldiers are not taught to consider the harsh living conditions, fear, and sense of obligation that fuel enemy soldiers. American soldiers are especially not taught to recognize that enemy soldiers may simply be defending their country and families from outside invaders. Instead, every enemy soldier is a coward and a shithead.

Pejorative terms have been used liberally throughout all of military history. The list of terms for just the past hundred years is rather extensive: boche, kraut, Jap, Nip, zipperhead, gook, slope, dink, Johnny Jihad, sand nigger, etc. These terms all serve to make the enemy inferior and less human. Generic terms without the racial slurs achieve the same goal. As mentioned previously with regard to the lingo used to describe death in the Vietnam War, language is everything. If a soldier calls the enemy a derogatory name enough

³³ Ibid., 34–35.

times, then the enemy becomes that name in the mind of the soldier. When this happens, the enemy ceases to look human. The soldier sees the enemy as the exact opposite of himself. In the interview above, it can be concluded that Wold sees himself as brave, while all enemy soldiers are cowards. Wold is smart, while all enemy soldiers are shitheads. According to Sites, this is fundamentally a “wartime necessity [that enables] soldiers to kill in battle without paralyzing regret.”³⁴

George Sherston, Sassoon’s character in *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, does not blame the soldiers for the use of derogatory language, however. When reflecting on the dead German soldiers of the First World War, Sherston states, “These dead were unlike our own; perhaps it was the strange uniform, perhaps their look of butchered hostility, anyhow they were one with the little trench direction boards whose unfamiliar lettering seemed to epitomize that queer feeling I used to have when I stared across no-man’s-land, ignorant of the humanity which was on the other side.”³⁵ For Sassoon, the dehumanization of the enemy was a result of the soldiers’ ignorance, rather than a conscious choice. Dehumanizing the enemy is simply a result of training and society. Sherston describes an officer that trained him on how to use a bayonet:

He spoke with homicidal eloquence, keeping the game alive with genial and well-judged jokes. He had a Sergeant to assist him. The Sergeant, a small sinewy machine, had been trained to such a pitch of frightfulness that at a moment’s warning he could divest himself of all semblance of humanity... ‘To instill fear into the

³⁴ Ibid., 166.

³⁵ Sassoon, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, 60.

opponent' was one of the Major's main maxims. Man, it seemed had been created to jab the life out of Germans. To hear the Major talk, one might have thought that he did it himself every day before breakfast. His final words were: "Remember that every Boche you fellows kill is a point scored to our side; every Boche you kill brings victory one minute nearer and shortens the war by one minute. Kill them! Kill them! There's only one good Boche, and that's a dead one!"³⁶

With training that labels all enemies under a collective derogatory slur and refers to kills as "points," it is extremely difficult for a soldier to see the enemy as something that is fully human.

Military leaders understand "[t]his apparently self-evident truth—that men cannot kill an enemy understood to be honorable and like oneself..."³⁷ In the First World War, the German and British soldiers famously held a Christmas truce in 1914. This truce is most definitely a result of both sides discovering their common humanity. These two stanzas from Frederick Niven's poem "A Carol From Flanders" describe this sentiment.

They called from each to each across
The hideous disarray
(For terrible had been their loss):
"Oh, this is Christmas day!"

Their rifles all they set aside,
One impulse to obey;
'Twas just the men on either side,

³⁶ Ibid, 7.

³⁷ Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*, 103.

Just men — and Christmas day.³⁸

When the soldiers realized that it was “just men” on the other side, the war came to a halt; the fighting ceased. For military leaders, this type of action cannot occur regularly, if at all. The point of a war is to secure victory over the enemy, and military leaders need their soldiers to want to kill the enemy. A soldier cannot be friends with the enemy because it compromises the war effort. Instead, soldiers must be “trained to hate the ‘bad guys’ and not to ask many questions about what [makes] them ‘bad.’”³⁹

Robert Emmet Meagher argues that the tradition of degrading the enemy is at least as old as the Trojan War. In *The Iliad*, however, the enemy is not always dehumanized. Rather, “the words exchanged by enemies often aim to turn the other into a woman (or androgynous youth), weak and helpless before the might and designs of the man before her.”⁴⁰ Turning the enemy into the woman degraded the enemy in ancient Greek thought, but it did not make the enemy unhuman in the mind of the soldier. Meagher uses the exchange between Ajax and Hector as an example:

[Hector is speaking to Ajax:]
 Zeus-sprung Telamonian Ajax, I know that you captain
 Your company, but do not treat me like some puny boy
 Or some unwarlike woman. My knowledge of fighting
 And slaughter is great, and I am skillful indeed

³⁸ Frederick Niven, “A Carol From Flanders,” in *A Book of Verse of the Great War*, ed. William Reginald Wheeler (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1917), 111-112.

³⁹ Brock and Lettini, *Soul Repair*, 40.

⁴⁰ Meagher, *Killing from the Inside Out*, 29.

At wielding to left and to right my seasoned hide shield,
At handling tough hide as only a good warrior can.⁴¹

Jonathon Shay, who has done extensive research on the warfare of *The Iliad*, also noticed that the enemy was very rarely made to be subhuman in Homer's works. It did occur infrequently, but it was not the normal way that soldiers behaved. For example, after Hector asks Achilles to grant him a proper funeral, Achilles responds with "Do not beg me by my knees or by my parents, You dog!"⁴² At this point in the epic, however, Achilles's behavior is the most extreme of all of the soldiers participating in the war. Shay proposes that the tradition of dehumanizing the enemy as normal behavior actually came from the West's strong belief in the Judeo-Christian-Muslim God.⁴³ Interestingly enough, though, it was Christmas that inspired the soldiers of World War I to hold a truce.

Shay suggests that "When modern American soldiers and their leaders dehumanize the enemy, they affirm their loyalty to God, expressing a cultural tradition powerfully engraved by biblical scripture."⁴⁴ This relates directly to the issue of the ban in ancient Hebrew warfare, in which all men, women, children, livestock, and property were destroyed in order to show loyalty to the Hebrew God. It is most clearly found in the book of Numbers, chapter 21:

⁴¹ Homer, *The Iliad* trans. E. V. Rieu (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 2005), 117. (VII. 256-262)

⁴² Ibid., 387. (XXII.403-404)

⁴³ For the moment, "God" should be understood as the traditional Judeo-Christian-Muslim concept of God. The concept of "God" as metaphor for the collective whole of society will be explored in depth later on, and these same ideas can be revisited by the reader through a different lens.

⁴⁴ Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*, 111.

“Then Israel made a vow to the Lord and said, ‘If you will indeed give this people into our hands, then we will utterly destroy their towns.’”⁴⁵ This sentiment is also apparent in Deuteronomy, chapter 13 which states:

...you shall put the inhabitants of that town to the sword, utterly destroying it and everything in it—even putting its livestock to the sword. All of its spoil you shall gather into its public square; then burn the town and all its spoil with fire, as a whole burnt offering to the Lord your God. It shall remain a perpetual ruin, never to be rebuilt.⁴⁶

With the ban, the enemies of the Israelites are “exterminated like vermin,”⁴⁷ which is quite different from the warfare of *The Iliad*. The idea that the enemy should be utterly destroyed runs deep within the traditions of society. More extreme than dehumanizing the enemy through derogatory slurs, the language describing how the enemy should be treated is even more violent and degrading. There is no regard for the humanity that exists within the enemy or the innocent people that will also be exterminated. To see how this sentiment still exists today, compare the biblical text above to an excerpt from a speech by 2016 presidential candidate Ted Cruz.

Instead we will have a president who will make clear we will utterly destroy ISIS. We will carpet bomb them into oblivion. I

⁴⁵ NRSV *Reference Bible with the Apocrypha*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), 169.(Numbers 21:2)

⁴⁶ Ibid., 207-208. (Deuteronomy. 13:15-16)

⁴⁷ Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*, 114.

don't know if sand can glow in the dark, but we're gonna find out.⁴⁸

Cruz is known to be well-liked among conservative evangelical Christians, and his speech clearly echoes ancient Hebrew ideas of how warfare should be conducted. The enemy must be seen as vermin to be exterminated. Above all else, the enemy can never be allowed to have humanity.

Dehumanizing the enemy is capable of blinding soldiers and society in general as to what they are actually doing. In war, humans kill other humans. Neither side of a war is ever more or less human than the other. Part of making the enemy less than human involves the individual becoming something more than human. Becoming more than human is the final major cause of moral injury to be explored, and it comes from participation in the same society that blindly dehumanizes the enemy.

Becoming God

The American myth—that we are a nation under God, stamped with his seal of approval, gifted with a unique destiny, and carrying a lifetime guarantee on our wars, that they will be just and successful—is alive and well, at least in the public sphere.⁴⁹

Robert Emmet Meagher
Killing from the Inside Out

⁴⁸ Phillip Rucker, "Ted Cruz vows to 'utterly destroy ISIS' and 'carpet bomb' terrorists," *The Washington Post*, last modified December 5, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/12/05/ted-cruz-vows-to-utterly-destroy-isis-and-carpet-bomb-terrorists/>.

⁴⁹ Meagher, *Killing from the Inside Out*, 140.

Soldiers can feel like they have lost their humanity, not by becoming something less than human, but by becoming more than human. This will be referred to as “becoming God.” With this, “God” is not the traditional notion of a supernatural deity. Rather, “God” serves as a metaphor for the collective whole of a community, people, or nation. It is not uncommon for soldiers to join the military to become part of something greater than themselves. The collective whole of the military, along with the whole of the society that the military represents, could be said to have supernatural powers because it has much more power than the individual ever could. With the idea that the collective whole wages war, creates peace, takes life, and gives life, it can metaphorically be interpreted as God—a being with enormous power and control.

Émile Durkheim, the father of modern sociology, proposed the idea that individuals are united in a society through a totem, a symbol of religious or sacred nature. A totem serves to bind the society together and give it an identity. In Durkheim’s thought, “the totem, in brief, is simultaneously the symbol of both the god *and* the clan, because both the god and the clan are really the same thing!”⁵⁰ Following this, it is possible to explore the God of the ancient Israelites, the God of the Christianized Roman Empire, and the United States of America as gods in a Durkheimian sense. Patriotism, when the society is God, is nothing more than a synonym for religious fervor. Patriotism is perhaps the strongest form of group consciousness. Durkheim noted that more developed societies are less likely to have a uniform group consciousness, but war provides

⁵⁰ Daniel L. Pals, *Eight Theories of Religion*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 100.

an exception to this rule. As Reinhold Niebuhr, a keen observer of society between the World Wars, stated it, "The increasing size of the group increases the difficulties of achieving a group self-consciousness, except as it comes in conflict with other groups and is unified by perils and passions of war."⁵¹ War has a unique ability to completely unite societies by establishing an "us versus them" mentality. For example, the Authorization to Use Military Force Against Terrorists in 2001 by the United States Congress passed unanimously in the Senate and only had one vote against it in the House of Representatives. Both World Wars and the Vietnam War also had almost unanimous votes of approval by Congress.

According to Nancy Sherman, a philosopher and war ethicist at Georgetown University, "warriors prepare for war by rallying behind a cause."⁵² Patriotism, which is pride or love for an individual's society, motivates many who join the military. In a way, patriotism is affirmation of society being God. It motivates individuals to defend the collective whole at all costs. However, it also allows the society to be exempt from critique, especially with regards to war. Niebuhr declares that "most individuals lack the intellectual penetration to form independent judgements and therefore accept the moral opinions of their society."⁵³ Niebuhr later notes more bluntly that "the sentiment of patriotism achieves a potency in the modern soul, so unqualified, that the nation is given *carte blanche* to use the power, compounded of the devotion of

⁵¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 48.

⁵² Sherman, *The Untold War*, 39.

⁵³ Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 18.

individuals, for any purpose it desires.”⁵⁴ In short, patriotism is able to prevent individuals from thinking for themselves, as they merely accept whatever society tells them. As will be explored later, this form of patriotism can have serious negative effects on the souls of soldiers who feel that they have been misled by society.

The idea of soldiers becoming God can be seen in biblical warfare. The ancient Israelites, under the leadership of Joshua, conquered the land of Canaan by waging war against the peoples that were already living in the area. Scripture claims that God promised them the land and then gave it to them through their military conquests. However, the story could also be interpreted that the Israelites wanted the land and then stole it, by killing all men, women, and children of the groups that already inhabited the area. The Durkheimian idea of God-as-society unites these two interpretations: God (the society) wanted the land to belong to the Israelites (the society), so the society waged war in the *name of God* (the totem of the society). God giving the land to the Israelites is the same thing as the Israelites taking the land for themselves. With this, Joshua and his soldiers served as the *hands of God*.

Elie Wiesel explores the character of Joshua in his book *Five Biblical Portraits*. In the portrait, Wiesel describes Joshua as “the fiercest warrior, the bravest commander in Jewish history, and its most victorious general as well.”⁵⁵ Joshua is also enshrined in West Point’s Hall of Fame as the first notable military strategist and field

⁵⁴ Ibid., 92.

⁵⁵ Elie Wiesel, *Five Biblical Portraits* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 4.

commander. The most effective strategy that Joshua used had nothing to do with battle plans or the enemy. Rather, Joshua won battles because he reminded all of Israel why they were fighting. As Wiesel points out, Israel lost battles when they broke the Law and won battles when they followed the Law. To remind them of the Law, Joshua read the whole Torah to the troops and the people of Israel before engaging in battle. This is nothing short of wartime propaganda. Able to kindle patriotic, nationalistic, and religious fervor, Joshua inspired "his men [to fight] better because they knew what they were fighting for, and for whom."⁵⁶ This reminded them that they were fighting for God, in the name of God, and with God's approval.

The Israelites do not stop to question if they are truly acting according to God's will. Instead, they adopt a group consciousness that is void of critical thought about the subject of war. They are fighting *for God*. Doubting the will of God is blasphemy. This strong sense of community and oneness across Israelite society is what allowed it to survive. Wiesel states that Joshua is "Moses' and God's vital link to eternity."⁵⁷ Perhaps, Joshua is God's link to eternity because he is more accurately described as Israel's link to eternity. Durkheim noted that a god cannot survive without the society that believes in it. This is quite possibly how the Hebrew God survived: Israel survived, and Israel and its God are one.

Such propaganda to encourage soldiers to fight "for the will of God" occurred in early Christian history as well. What began as a

⁵⁶ Ibid., 14.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 9.

non-violent counter-culture Jesus movement in the first century became something of a drastically different nature in the year 380 when the Edict of Thessalonica made Christianity the official state religion of the Roman Empire. Emperor Constantine had a major hand in this with his apparent conversion to Christianity and the adoption of Christian symbols in 312. As Robert Emmet Meagher points out, with his conversion to Christianity, "Constantine and the evil empire became, overnight as it were, holy."⁵⁸ Under a Christian empire, any military endeavors of the state could be declared "for Christ" and society would not question them. In the same fashion as the ancient Israelites when they conquered the land of Canaan, "the [Roman] imperial legions were now the agents of God, the enforcers of his will, the devouring flame of his wrath."⁵⁹ Soldiers and military commanders had become God; the empire, its military, and its people all became divine. Any military endeavor, any act of defense or offense, and any massacre were now the holy will of God (at least according to the emperor).

Of course, Constantine alone did not make the empire holy. Augustine and Ambrose were very useful to the state, by encouraging the church to endorse the endeavors of the empire. Both were vital springs of religious propaganda. Of Augustine and Ambrose, Meagher states "Both believed that, due to the original fall of man from grace and God, chaos was the default position of the human race and that order came at a price, a price they were willing to pay, or at least a price that they were willing to urge others to

⁵⁸ Meagher, *Killing from the Inside Out*, 66.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 83.

pay.”⁶⁰ Augustine, who is considered the father of Just War Theory, was especially vital to the empire as he helped to create rules that allowed the empire to wage war against other peoples with God’s endorsement. Phillip Jenkins, a historian of early Christianity, explains that “Through sermons, processions, and devotions, the church controlled the media through which urban opinion could be manipulated.”⁶¹ With the people hearing from the government that they were fighting according to God’s will and the religious authorities confirming it, very few members of society would have thought otherwise. When soldiers of the Christianized Roman Empire fought, they did not only fight for God, but as God, squashing all of God’s enemies.

The religious fervor of the ancient Israelites and the early Christians is very similar, if not identical to the patriotism that has been used to fuel America’s wars in the modern era. In *Soul Repair*, Brock and Lettini write that “Military service for most of American history was widely regarded as a sign of strength of character and an expression of patriotism.”⁶² This can be seen very clearly through the reflections of Camillo “Mac” Bica, a Vietnam War veteran interviewed extensively by Brock and Lettini. Now a professor and philosopher of war, Bica joined the Marines after a close friend of his, Ralphie, was killed in combat in Vietnam. As an example of patriotic fervor, “he felt proud to become part of a long line of chivalrous warriors ready to sacrifice his life for God, his country, and his

⁶⁰ Ibid., 72.

⁶¹ Phillip Jenkins, *Jesus Wars: How Four Patriarchs, Three Queens, and Two Emperors Decided What Christians Would Believe for the Next 1,500 Years* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 93.

⁶² Brock and Lettini, *Soul Repair*, 1.

comrades.”⁶³ He specifically notes embracing the “mythology” of the military, and it is clear that he was joining the Marines to serve as the hand of God fighting against evil.

Marine Corps training was truly a life-altering experience. What ultimately enables a Marine to ignore the ethical limits normally placed on the uses of violence—to kill and to die in battle—is not abstract ideology, but a personal code of honor, self-respect, loyalty, and accountability to one’s comrades. I learned my lessons well and readily embraced the mythology of the warrior. Upon completion of my training, I became part of a proud and chivalrous tradition, a select brotherhood of noble and courageous knights, empowered by God and country to exorcize the demonic agents of evil. I was prepared to kill and to selflessly sacrifice my life, if need be, for right and for good. After Ralphie’s death and the sacrifices of the Old Ones, how could I do anything less?⁶⁴

Bica went to Vietnam to protect his country; however, he feels that it is more accurate to say that he was sent to Vietnam to “kill indiscriminately.”⁶⁵ Patriotic fervor in the modern age is no different from religious fervor amongst the ancient Israelites. In warfare, God and America serve the same purpose: a collective totem that justifies fighting, dying, and killing. God and America are both ideas that are used to hold peoples together. In both instances, loyalty to the totems of society results in indiscriminate killing. The similarities between ancient Israelite warfare and American involvement in Vietnam are striking:

⁶³ Ibid., 19.

⁶⁴ Camillo Bica, quoted in Brock and Lettini, *Soul Repair*, 19.

⁶⁵ Brock and Lettini, *Soul Repair*, 20.

Ancient Israelites

- There are no instances in the book of Joshua in which there is questioning about going to war.
- Belief in God fuels the wars.
- To ensure success, God had to be pleased with all of the soldiers. (Joshua chapter 7)
- Loyalty to God demanded that all men, women, children, livestock, and property be utterly destroyed.

America in Vietnam

- The House of Representatives passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution unanimously and only two senators opposed.
- Belief in America, or democracy, fuels the war against communism.
- Public opinion in America came to oppose the Vietnam War, which is often considered a major reason for the failure of the war.
- Loyalty to America resulted in "indiscriminate killing." Tactics such as carpet bombing and the use of Agent Orange did not discern between combatants and noncombatants or military targets and civilian homes.

Becoming God is not a new development in the way that militaries function. Patriotism and belief in the "cause" have always been vital for success in warfare. Both the combatants and the supporting society must believe in the war for victory. However, becoming God can have serious consequences for the humanity of

the combatants involved. Belief in God, belief in the Roman Empire, and belief in America are all capable of convincing regular individuals to become part of something much greater than themselves. Belief in these allows extraordinary things to occur, both good and bad. Belief in God can result in the massacre of whole people groups, or it can inspire soldiers to cease fighting as they sing Christmas carols. Belief in America can result in countless innocent deaths, or it can inspire an Air Force pilot to drop candy to children behind the Iron Curtain.⁶⁶

When soldiers realize that they have been misled by their patriotism, or duped into becoming God, moral injury often sets in. Below is an excerpt from a poem written by Mac Bica in response to his participation in war and realizing that the “mythology of the warrior” has misled him.

I fear I am no longer alien to this horror.
 I am, I am, I am the horror.
 I have lost my humanity
 and have embraced the insanity of war.
 The monster and I are one.
 ...
 The blood of innocents forever stains my soul!
 The transformation is complete,
 and I can never return.
*Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa.*⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Gail Halvorsen, famously known as the “Candy Bomber” dropped candy to children in East Berlin on a weekly basis during the Berlin airlift of 1948 and 1949.

⁶⁷ Camillo Bica, quoted in Brock and Lettini, *Soul Repair*, 20. *Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa* comes from the Catholic sacrament of Penance and means “through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault.”

In God We Trusted

The dishonesty of nations is a necessity of political policy if the nation is to gain the full benefit of its double claim upon the loyalty and devotion of the individual, as his own special and unique community and as a community which embodies universal values and ideals. The two claims, the one touching the individual's emotions and the other appealing to his mind, are incompatible with each other, and can be resolved only through dishonesty. This is particularly evident in war-time.⁶⁸

Reinhold Niebuhr
Moral Man and Immoral Society

Just war is a dead letter...It was never more than a theory, and at its worst it was a lie, a deadly lie.⁶⁹

Robert Emmet Meagher
Killing From the Inside Out

Moral injury is most directly related to the sense of being duped, or being misled, by society, superiors, and even the self. In the case of "becoming machine," soldiers often feel like they have had their ability to choose stripped from them. As part of the machine, soldiers feel that they are merely pawns. Likewise, soldiers are misled when the enemy is dehumanized. In war, soldiers often learn to the contrary that the enemy is very much human. These are combined with soldiers "becoming God," only to find out that their

⁶⁸ Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 95-96.

⁶⁹ Meagher, *Killing from the Inside Out*, 129.

own moral conscience is in opposition to the will of the God of which they became part. With moral injury, it appears that these are the main factors that mix together within a single individual. These factors exist in varying ratios and intensities, but soldiers most commonly feel anger, shame, and guilt when they become aware of being misled. Every case of moral injury is different, and it can occur at different times for each individual. Some individuals recognize that they will be participating in a system that contradicts their moral code even before entering the military or fighting in combat. For others, moral injury may not become apparent until long after their service in the military is over.

The term “crusade” frequently comes up in discussions about war, often with negative connotations. Crusades are supposed to be holy endeavors, fought for God and approved by God. However, the term has been used to refer to wars fought for the whims of the rich and the leaders of society rather than for a just cause. Modern crusades are generally linked with the idea that leaders have lied to society about the true causes of war. Reinhold Niebuhr describes the nature of such a war, stating that “the poor folk go to war, to fight and to die for the riches and superfluities of others.”⁷⁰ Historically, it has been true that the rich do not fight their own wars; the poor do it for them. In today’s military, many soldiers joined in order to escape poverty and/or receive funding to attend college. Members of the wealthy class do not have to do this. Likewise in the Vietnam War, college students were able to defer conscription into the military. Those unable to afford college did not have this luxury. The Vietnam

⁷⁰ Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 11.

War is an example of a war frequently painted as a crusade. Tim O'Brien explains his view of those who supported the war:

I held them responsible. By God, yes I *did*... They didn't know Bao Dai from the man in the moon. They didn't know history. They didn't know the first thing about Diem's tyranny, or the nature of Vietnamese nationalism, or the long colonialism of the French — this was all too damned complicated, it required some reading — but no matter, it was a war to stop the Communists, plain and simple, which was how they liked things, and you were a treasonous pussy if you had second thoughts about killing or dying for plain and simple reasons.⁷¹

The Vietnam War was a crusade against communism, rather than a war waged against an oppressed people struggling to overthrow a tyrannical government. Society, along with the soldiers that defend it, is often misled by simplicity, when there is actually no such thing as “simplicity” in war.

Society as a whole is duped by this false simplicity. As shown above, society generally likes to exist in “plain and simple” terms. That is, society prefers to live in a black and white world. Niebuhr proposes that this is the case because “Most individuals lack the intellectual penetration to form independent judgements and therefore accept the moral opinions of their society.”⁷² At the same time, the creeds and institutions that govern society “have never become fully divorced from the special interests of the commercial classes who conceived and developed them.”⁷³ The mix of these two

⁷¹ O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*, 45.

⁷² Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 36.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 14.

ideas can be seen very clearly in both the Vietnam War and the current conflicts in the Middle East. At first, society supported the wars, or crusades, almost whole-heartedly because the causes existed in plain and simple terms. Later, however, society began to question and doubt what it had been told by its leaders, leading to a lack of support for the wars. After troops have been sent to war with “God’s” approval, it is generally too late for society to say “we don’t want this war after all.” Because of its desire for a simple cause, a simple plot of good and evil, and a world of only black and white, society is responsible for its own duping.

Phillip Jenkins, in his study of the wars that established orthodoxy in the first centuries of Christianity, proposes that the general public did not understand very much about the wars or what was actually being fought over, similar to the public support at the beginning of the wars of the past century. Jenkins writes, “People knew the slogans, but did they really understand them? Actually, an excellent case can be made that such distinctions were beyond the reach of not just ordinary believers but of many church leaders.”⁷⁴ This reflects how complex war is and has always been. Even the leaders of the Church, who were urging the public to support the wars, had difficulty understanding everything. It is nearly impossible for the average member of society to have the depth of understanding that is necessary to engage in war. Yet, in America today, every member of society is allowed to vote and have a say. On an even more extreme level than in the first centuries of Christianity, the people responsible for making war today do not have a thorough understanding of what they are doing.

⁷⁴ Jenkins, *Jesus Wars*, 62.

This same idea is present in Siegfried Sassoon's writings about World War I. He specifically notes that "Bellicose politicians and journalists were fond of using the word 'crusade.'"⁷⁵ In his novel, the main character's grandmother believed that "It was her duty, as a patriotic Englishwoman, to agree that 'every man who killed a German was performing a Christian act.'"⁷⁶ The Church of England was very much in support of the war effort, and it preached this to its congregations. The congregants then supported the war effort whole-heartedly because they trusted their leaders and religious authorities to tell them the truth. However, the congregants were, at best, only receiving a simplified, watered-down version of the truth. This simplified perspective on war is both ancient and continuous. The ancient Israelites destroyed the enemies of God without question. Englishmen in World War I were fighting the evil Germans. Americans in Vietnam were fighting communism. Americans in the Middle East are killing terrorists. Public reasoning for war rarely goes much deeper.

Because society is misled, soldiers are also misled as both members and defenders of their society. Niebuhr explains that "The frustrations of the average man, who can never realize the power and the glory which his imagination sets as the ideal, makes him the more willing tool and victim of the imperial ambitions of his group."⁷⁷ In this, the average person cannot make his/her own hopes and dreams come true, so he/she turns to society to achieve them. This makes an individual a willing victim, as it were, of society's

⁷⁵ Sassoon, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, 120.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁷⁷ Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 18.

whims. Being this sort of “willing tool” of the group often leads individuals to participate in the war effort. Eventually though, many soldiers feel that they have been betrayed by society, their leaders, and themselves into participation in something that they do not actually support or find just. In Brock and Lettini’s *Soul Repair*, Herm Keizer, Jr., a retired army chaplain who served in Vietnam, related the sense of betrayal to Psalm 51. However, in reading this Psalm, the “betrayed” soldier plays the roles of both Nathan and David. This psalm is attributed to David, and it refers to Nathan confronting David about his affair with Bathsheba and his guilt in having Bathsheba’s husband die in battle. This makes the individual soldier both the accuser and the accused. When Keizer has soldiers experiencing moral injury read this psalm, they “often describe their feelings of betrayal by their government but also their own shame and guilt.”⁷⁸

Psalm 51

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.

For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
and blameless when you pass judgment.

⁷⁸ Brock and Lettini, *Soul Repair*, 27.

Indeed, I was born guilty,
a sinner when my mother conceived me.

You desire truth in the inward being;
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.
Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.
Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.

Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.
Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,
O God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.

O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.
For you have no delight in sacrifice;
if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be
pleased.
The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Do good to Zion in your good pleasure;
rebuild the walls of Jerusalem,

then you will delight in right sacrifices,
in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings;
then bulls will be offered on your altar.⁷⁹

In this psalm, it is clear that David experiences extreme shame and guilt over having broken his moral code. However, within a soldier experiencing moral injury, the shame and guilt is possibly even more intense because the individual soldier is accused by his/her own self, not an outsider.

When a person realizes that participation in a war violates his/her personal moral code, contradicting the desires of society can be extremely harmful. This leaves individuals with a very difficult choice between accepting the consequences of breaking their moral codes or the consequences of contradicting society. Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* includes a short story about himself considering running away to Canada after being informed that he was drafted into service in the Vietnam War. In the story, O'Brien ends up living at a vacant vacation resort near the border with just the elderly owner of the property. O'Brien wants to run to Canada because he does not believe that the Vietnam War is just, and he does not want to contradict his own moral code. However, he is afraid of the shame that running away would cause his family, and he is not willing to permanently run away from his life and his loved ones. He repeatedly calls himself a coward for not being able to go to Canada, which is contrary to the standard ideas that cowards run from war, while the brave go to war.

⁷⁹ NRSV Reference Bible with the Apochrypha, 628. (Psalm 51)

I would not swim away from my hometown and my country and my life. I would not be brave.⁸⁰

I was ashamed of my conscience, ashamed to be doing the right thing.⁸¹

I would go to the war—I would kill and maybe die—because I was embarrassed not to.⁸²

I was a coward. I went into the war.⁸³

This same sentiment is found in the example of Camillo Bica, who was looked at previously. Also serving in Vietnam because he felt that he was doing what was “right,” Bica came to believe that the war was against his moral conscience while in-country. Bica “regrets not just walking away and attributes his continuing to fight to a lack of courage.”⁸⁴ His statement about war is very similar to O’Brien’s:

We are the victims of politicians’ hypocrisy, the scapegoats for the inevitable affront to the national conscience, and the sacrificial lambs sent to slaughter in retribution for our collective guilt and inadequacies. In fact, no one knows the sacrilege of war better than we who must fight it and then have to live with the memories of what we have done and what we have become.⁸⁵

⁸⁰ O’Brien, *The Things They Carried*, 57.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 59.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁸⁴ Brock and Lettini, *Soul Repair*, 21

⁸⁵ Camillo Bica, quoted in Brock and Lettini, *Soul Repair*, 21.

In society, it is generally assumed that cowards run away from war, while the brave go to war. In fact, it would be considered heretical by almost all of society to propose that going to war is cowardice. Conscientious objectors to war are more frequently seen as free-loaders than people who bravely stand up for their moral beliefs. Of course, it must be conceded that there are cases of conscientious objectors who do not have moral oppositions to war and are simply afraid to fight. However, perhaps those with true moral opposition to war are courageous because they become lumped into the same group as those who are “simply afraid to fight.” With the cases of O’Brien and Bica, neither is afraid to risk death by fighting in war. They both see going to war as the easier choice, with the fear of society’s disapproval of their actions being a greater danger than entering combat. O’Brien even claims that he was not opposed to war, stating “There were occasions, I believed, when a nation was justified in using military force to achieve its ends, to stop a Hitler or some comparable evil, and I told myself that in such circumstances I would’ve willingly marched off to the battle.”⁸⁶ The Vietnam War did not meet O’Brien’s personal criteria for a just war, and conscientious objection does not exist for specific wars.

Contradicting a nation’s war effort is a cardinal sin against society. Those who openly oppose a popular war are often looked down upon, taunted, and threatened. Just as religious and patriotic fervor can be viewed through the stories of the Hebrew Bible, the consequences of opposing that fervor can also be found. For this, it is beneficial to look at the example of Saul, the first king of Israel. Similar to the way that Bica claims to be a victim of politicians, Elie

⁸⁶ O’Brien, *The Things They Carried*, 44.

Wiesel claims that “Saul was God’s victim...”⁸⁷ Wiesel is referring to God in a traditional Jewish sense, but it is possible to read his portrait of Saul through the lens of society-as-God. To set the stage, the Israelites had been governed by judges and God was considered their king. After the people demanded to have a human king, Samuel, a prophet and the last of the judges, was sent by God to find Saul and anoint him as the first king. Saul was chosen by God to be the king, instead of Saul choosing to make himself king. It could also be inferred that Saul did not even want to rule, as he was found hiding behind baggage when it was time to publicly choose the first king. Being the king of Israel also meant that Saul would become the leader of Israel’s military. As the military leader, Saul was responsible for carrying out the same ban as Joshua against the enemies of God: utterly destroy all men, women, children, livestock, and property. Wiesel notes that “God compelled him to accept [kingship]—without ever telling him that royalty, or authority, also involves the shedding of blood.”⁸⁸ Saul’s major downfall came when he chose not to issue the ban completely against the Amalekites. Saul spared the life of the Amalekite king Agag, and was subsequently eternally punished by God:

Samuel said to Saul, “I will not return with you; for you have rejected the word of the Lord, and the Lord has rejected you from being king over Israel.” As Samuel turned to go away, Saul caught hold of the hem of his robe, and it tore. And Samuel said to him, “The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this very day, and has given it to a neighbor of yours, who is better than you.

⁸⁷ Wiesel, *Five Biblical Portraits*, 91.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 86.

Moreover the Glory of Israel will not recant or change his mind;
for he is not a mortal, that he should change his mind."⁸⁹

From here, Samuel goes to David to anoint him as the next king. Meanwhile, Saul loses favor with God, and with the people of his kingdom. Both God and the people began to favor David, which supports the idea that the will of God is also the will of the people. Because he chose not to issue the ban, "the spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him."⁹⁰

The most common speculation for Saul's failure to carry out the ban is because he chose mercy instead. Reasoning for this is not found in the biblical text itself, but rather in the traditions of Jewish Midrash. Wiesel carries on this tradition in his portrait of Saul and explores the possibility of Saul being punished for refusing to break his moral code. With this speculation, the punishment that Saul receives is very similar to the punishment that O'Brien and Bica claimed that they were too cowardly to face. Wiesel writes:

God is against him, and Saul knows it: hadn't Samuel said so again and again? The final break came during the unfortunate episode with the Amalekite king Agag. Yes, Saul disobeyed Samuel and refused to execute his royal adversary; yes he gave in to his feelings, his compassion, and is his own victim. Is that a reason to condemn him irrevocably? Yes, says Samuel, because Saul is too kind, too charitable, because he is unwilling to behead a

⁸⁹ NRSV *Reference Bible with Apochrypha*, 315. (1 Samuel 15:26-29)

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 316. (1 Samuel 16:14)

human being. Between the voices of heaven and his heart, he chooses to listen to his heart.⁹¹

For Saul, obeying God meant violating his moral conscience, while obeying society meant the same for Bica and O'Brien. Saul even experiences the same feeling of being duped by God that many war participants can identify with. Wiesel has Saul posing the question "Why did you make me play a part on David's stage without telling me that it was only a game?"⁹² Saul was drafted into being king, and appears like nothing more than God's pawn, used to establish David as the ideal archetype of Israel's king.

When examining Saul's story with God as a metaphor for society, it becomes clear how Bica and O'Brien could both propose that they were not brave enough to refuse to participate in the Vietnam War. It would have been easier for Saul to kill Agag; he would have kept his kingdom, the support of the people, and God's favor. However, the moral effects that would have occurred if Saul had executed Agag are impossible to infer. It is very possible that he could have experienced moral injury, becoming tormented by guilt and shame for violating his moral conscience. Regardless, his story represents the trials that soldiers fear facing when obeying their moral conscience contradicts the will of society. The pressure of society, the military, and public leaders, as in the examples of Bica and O'Brien, can make it extremely difficult for individuals to

⁹¹ Wiesel, *Five Biblical Portraits*, 86.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 88.

remain true to their personal moral codes. Neither God nor the draft board will “let you choose your war.”⁹³

Moral injury occurs when individuals become aware that they have violated or will violate their moral conscience. As noted previously, some soldiers experience moral injury even before their participation in war begins, while others do not experience moral injury until the fog of combat has finally faded away. First, there is often anger at the system, the military, and society as a whole for misleading soldiers. The word “victim” has been used extensively in the illustrations of this section. This is not incidental. Siegfried Sassoon’s character George Sherston stated that in World War I, those who entered the war as “drafts of volunteers were now droves of victims.”⁹⁴ More harshly, he referred to participation in the war as “military martyrdom”⁹⁵ and had an extreme bitterness toward society. Similar to O’Brien’s reflection of society during the Vietnam War, Sherston says, “I began to feel that it was my privilege to be bitter about my war experiences; and my attitude toward civilians implied that they couldn’t understand and that it was no earthly use trying to explain things to them.”⁹⁶

This bitterness and anger towards the systems that caused the moral violation is extremely intense. It can be compared to a person who, through life experiences and reflection, has determined that there is no God and that he/she is in fact an atheist. Sherston describes his loss of support for the war effort by stating that it “was

⁹³ O’Brien, *The Things They Carried*, 44.

⁹⁴ Sassoon, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, 109.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 183.

not unlike a young man who suddenly loses his belief in religion and stands up to tell the Universal Being that He doesn't exist, adding that if he does, he treats the world very unjustly."⁹⁷ With moral injury, society and leaders are the recipients of this same type of anger. The bitterness can be felt in the memoirs and writings of those who feel duped. Below is a suicide note from Colonel Theodore Westhusing that embodies exactly this type of anger. Westhusing was a former professor at West Point and chose to serve in Iraq in 2004 under the belief that the war was just. Once arriving in Iraq, he felt that he had been misled into volunteering.

THANKS FOR TELLING ME IT WAS A GOOD DAY UNTIL I BRIEFED YOU. [REDACTED NAME]—YOU ARE ONLY INTERESTED IN YOUR CAREER AND PROVIDE NO SUPPORT TO YOUR STAFF—NO MSN [MISSION] SUPPORT AND YOU DON'T CARE. I CANNOT SUPPORT A MSN THAT LEADS TO CORRUPTION, HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES AND LIARS. I AM SULLIED—NO MORE. I DIDN'T VOLUNTEER TO SUPPORT CORRUPT, MONEY GRUBBING CONTRACTORS, NOR WORK FOR COMMANDERS ONLY INTERESTED IN THEMSELVES. I CAME TO SERVE HONORABLY AND FEEL DISHONORED. I TRUST NO IRAQI. I CANNOT LIVE THIS WAY. ALL MY LOVE TO MY FAMILY, MY WIFE AND MY PRECIOUS CHILDREN. I LOVE YOU AND TRUST YOU ONLY. DEATH BEFORE DISHONORED ANY MORE. TRUST IS ESSENTIAL—I DON'T KNOW WHO TRUST ANYMORE [SIC]. WHY SERVE WHEN YOU CANNOT ACCOMPLISH THE MISSION, WHEN YOU NO LONGER BELIEVE IN THE CAUSE, WHEN YOUR EVERY EFFORT AND BREATH TO SUCCEED MEETS WITH LIES, LACK OF SUPPORT AND SELFISHNESS? NO MORE.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 187.

REEVALUATE YOURSELVES, CDRS [COMMANDERS]. YOU
ARE NOT WHAT YOU THINK YOU ARE AND I KNOW IT.

—COL TED WESTHUSING

LIFE NEEDS TRUST. TRUST NO MORE FOR ME HERE
IN IRAQ.⁹⁸

This note is clearly full of anger at the military leaders and system, but anger is not the only emotion attached to moral injury. Rather, it is merely the beginning.

When a practical joke is played on a person, it is normal for that person to have some type of playful anger at the joker. However, the feeling of personal embarrassment for being gullible is usually greater than the anger at the joker. This is similar to the way that moral injury appears to function. The system, society, or the military betrayed the trust of the individual, but the individual has an even greater feeling of personal guilt and shame for participating in the system and allowing the moral violation to occur, even if it was done unknowingly. Guilt and shame, though often linked together, are not exactly synonyms. Most generally speaking, guilt refers to personal responsibility for an offense, while shame does not require personal responsibility. Guilt and shame appear to exist in

⁹⁸ Ted Westhusing, quoted in Brock and Lettini, *Soul Repair*, 41-42. Ted Westhusing's suicide note can also be found on the Texas Observer website and in Nancy Sherman's *The Untold War*. The format from *Soul Repair* was chosen because Westhusing wrote the note by hand in all capital letters. This URL contains the original story in the Texas Observer: <https://www.texasobserver.org/2440-i-am-sullied-no-more-faced-with-the-iraq-wars-corruption-col-ted-westhusing-chose-death-before-dishonor/>

different ratios from case to case. Nancy Sherman, in her work with veterans and active duty military personnel, discusses guilt more than shame. She notes that although soldiers are often aware that they are not responsible for deciding to go to war, “those same individuals feel morally accountable not just for how they fight but for what they fight for.”⁹⁹ Soldiers are not legally responsible for war or their actions in war if they are following the commands of a superior, but the moral conscience does not work strictly in terms of legality.

Shame, like guilt, comes from a consciousness or recognition of participation in something that could be considered morally wrong, yet it does not necessarily contain a sense of personal responsibility. Essentially, shame is when a person recognizes that he/she did something wrong, but does not feel personally at fault; the fault often lies with the system, society, or the war makers. Herm Keizer, the Vietnam War chaplain encountered above, provides insight into the nature of shame.

I noticed that my experience was different from those who were combatants, especially those who had taken life or watched innocent people be maimed or killed. I was amazed at their personal shame—not guilt—but profound, searing shame. Many felt that they had committed a personal affront against God. My religious training helped me see that what they were confronting is what many experience as sin, and I tried to minister to their broken souls.

Awareness of their shame and sin emerged, especially when I gave them the Imprecatory Psalms to read. Their reactions both

⁹⁹ Sherman, *The Untold War*, 41.

amazed and amused me. I could sense them being caught up in the poet's mood and tone.¹⁰⁰

With the mindset that Keizer observed, soldiers feel that they have sinned, but it is not their fault. Nonetheless, their moral consciences were violated, and it does not matter to them if it was intentional or not.

When these feelings of anger, guilt, and shame mix together, the most common result is self-inflicted solitude. Those who suffer from moral injury frequently do not feel as if they have anyone they can talk with or confide in on these matters. Brock and Lettini found that sufferers from moral injury banish themselves into solitary confinement and that "Some begin their emotional and spiritual isolation in battle as they grieve losses or silently doubt the morality of what they are doing."¹⁰¹ It is logical that when individuals feel that their humanity has been compromised or lessened, for them to then remove themselves from humanity, or the community or people. In this self-inflicted solitude, it is not uncommon for individuals to turn to drug usage, alcohol, or other vices as a means to self-medicate and curb the pain. When this occurs, the relationships with friends, family, and loved ones are understandably compromised.

Tim O'Brien shares a story of one of his comrades in Vietnam who entered this sort of solitude after the war. Norman Bowker, a soldier in O'Brien's platoon, held himself personally responsible for the death of another member in the unit. The platoon leader ordered his soldiers to camp near a river, after a day of heavy rain. Naturally,

¹⁰⁰ Herm Keizer, quoted in Brock and Lettini, *Soul Repair*, 26.

¹⁰¹ Brock and Lettini, *Soul Repair*, 48.

the river flooded. To make matters worse, the platoon leader had unknowingly ordered his soldiers to camp in a field that served as a community latrine. In the middle of the floods, a good friend of both O'Brien and Bowker was hit by mortar shell fire and injured. As a result, he drowned in the field of human excrement. Bowker held himself responsible for not being able to pull his friend out of the excrement and save his life. Upon returning home, Bowker found it impossible to talk to anyone else about the incident, which troubled him greatly. He wrote a letter to O'Brien suggesting that he should write a specific story.

What you should do, Tim, is write a story about a guy who feels like he got zapped over in that shithole. A guy who can't get his act together and just drives around town all day and can't think of any damn place to go and doesn't know how to get there anyway. This guy wants to talk about it, but he *can't*... If you want, you can use the stuff in this letter. (But not my real name, okay?) I'd write it myself except I can't ever find any words, if you know what I mean, and I can't figure out what exactly to say. Something about the field that night. The way Kiowa just disappeared into the crud. You were there—you can tell it.¹⁰²

Bowker is a perfect example of the type of solitary confinement that sufferers from moral injury experience. His guilt, regardless of whether it was real or perceived, tormented him to the point of no return. Bowker is also a perfect example of another truth about moral injury. The ending of his story is not happy; it is painfully realistic and heartbreaking:

¹⁰² O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*, 157.

In August of 1978 his mother sent me a brief note explaining what had happened. He'd been playing pickup basketball at the Y; after two hours he went off for a drink of water; he used a jump rope; his friends found him hanging from a water pipe. There was no suicide note, no message of any kind. "Norman was a quiet boy," his mother wrote, "and I don't suppose he wanted to bother anybody."¹⁰³

Moral injury is a lifelong struggle. For some, the struggle is unbearable, and suicide appears to be the best, or only, option. America is currently plagued with an incredibly high veteran and military suicide rate, and moral injury is clearly playing a part in many of these deaths. Of course, it is not the only factor that leads veterans to choosing suicide, but no factor should go unnoticed. Medications, drugs, alcohol, sex, and solitude all fall short when trying to heal broken souls. Drugs, prescription or illegal, cannot restore a broken moral code or truly heal the pain of feeling that your humanity has been taken from you. Logically though, suicide will make that paralyzing torment come to an end.

Finding the Cure

On the other side of the curtain if I was lucky I should meet the survivors, and we should begin to build up our little humanities all over again.¹⁰⁴

Siegfried Sassoon
Memoirs of an Infantry Officer

¹⁰³ Ibid., 160.

¹⁰⁴ Sassoon, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, 152.

Moral injury scholarship is still in its infancy, which means that a cure for moral injury is not fully understood or developed. What is clear with moral injury is that those who suffer from it feel that their humanity has either been lessened or taken from them. Because of this, humanity must be restored. For humanity to be restored within an individual, the person must rejoin the greater humanity. In other words, humanity cannot exist in solitude; rather, it exists between and among humans. One of the most pressing problems of the military today, according to Brock and Lettini, is that “there is a boot camp to prepare for war, but there is no boot camp to reintegrate veterans to civilian life.”¹⁰⁵ In many ancient societies, soldiers had to be ritually cleansed before reentering society, yet this is not the case in the modern world. In the Middle Ages, those who killed in battle often had to live in a monastery for a set period of time before returning to society. Today, soldiers returning from war simply return home and often fail to fully become part of society again. As one veteran described the return home in *Soul Repair*:

They say war is hell, but I say it's the foyer to hell. I say coming home is hell, and hell ain't got no coordinates. You can't find it on the charts. Hell is no place at all, so when you're there, you're nowhere—you're lost.¹⁰⁶

In the present conflict in Iraq, “soldiers received two briefings from a chaplain on readjusting to home and on suicide

¹⁰⁵ Brock and Lettini, *Soul Repair*, 42.

¹⁰⁶ Tyler Boudreau, quoted in Brock and Lettini *Soul Repair*, 65.

prevention.”¹⁰⁷ Put frankly in the words of a soldier, though, “A twenty-minute session centering on the admonition *Don’t commit suicide* doesn’t do much...”¹⁰⁸

A broken personal sense of humanity is restored by rejoining the greater humanity. Establishing, or re-establishing, meaningful relationships is absolutely vital for healing the wounds of moral injury. The difficulty in this is that many veterans, as has been shown, do not feel that anyone can relate to them and that they are alone. This makes the initial dialogue and forming of a relationship nearly impossible in some cases. Forming these relationships and creating avenues for the wounded to rejoin humanity has to be seen as a process. Various activities are currently being used to help veterans and soldiers have a sense of community and belonging. Groups dedicated to art, writing, music, fishing, cooking, and other activities allow veterans to have a group in which they feel that they belong. A common misconception is that the activities heal the wounds of a broken humanity, but it should be argued that the activities themselves do not matter nearly as much as the human connections that exist while participating in the activities. This is where hope can be found.

To show that the human connections are the vital part of these activities, a charity called Project Healing Waters Fly Fishing (PHWFF) can be used as an example. Project Healing Waters is dedicated to helping heal physically and emotionally wounded veterans through fly fishing and related activities such as rod

¹⁰⁷ Brock and Lettini *Soul Repair*, 60.

¹⁰⁸ Camilo Mejia, quoted in Brock and Lettini *Soul Repair*, 60.

making and fly tying. PHWFF groups have weekly classes for learning how to cast a fly rod and tying flies. The fishing outings are also always accompanied by a group gathering and meal. In effect, these activities create a small community. Sassoon described creating a similar type of small community of veterans after World War I as “build[ing] up our little humanities all over again.”¹⁰⁹ A testimonial from a volunteer at PHWFF shows the positive impact that these little humanities can have on those who have removed themselves from participation in humanity:

On our graduation party day, the vets were coming to our casting club for the final casting session of two hours, followed by lunch. One of the most quiet and most withdrawn of the participants came 45 minutes early. He told me he walked because he wanted to make sure he didn't miss any of it.¹¹⁰

This illustrates how participation in a group gives those who have lost their sense of meaning a place to belong again. A person can rejoin humanity gradually by being part of a little humanity. In the little humanities, relationships form around the activities, such as fishing, art, or music. Initial conversations are limited to the activities, but as relationships strengthen, the conversations can become broader. “Fishing friends” can become simply “friends,” and humanity can be redeemed.

The arts also have the ability to play a vital role in recovery from moral injury. Music and poetry can be especially useful. With music, emotions can be expressed between two or more people

¹⁰⁹ Sassoon, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, 152.

¹¹⁰ “Testimonials,” *Project Healing Waters Fly Fishing*, accessed April 10, 2016, <https://www.projecthealingwaters.org/About/Testimonials.aspx>.

without even using words. In the process of making and listening to music, communication can take place, and a little humanity can be formed. The performer(s) and the listener(s) are able to communicate and share a common bond, with minimal effort on the part of the individual with moral injury. Music, which has always been used to convey emotions, allows the person suffering from moral injury to experience the emotions of others, and to possibly even express his/her own emotions in return. Poetry can also be used in this sense; it allows people suffering from moral injury to come into contact with the emotions of others on their own terms and at their own comfort level. With both music and poetry, the individuals with moral injury are able to know that they are not alone; others have had the same feelings and similar experiences. Reminding people with moral injury that they are not alone is perhaps the most crucial part of recovery and cannot be stressed enough.

Along with working to restore a broken sense of humanity through rejoining humanity, it is vital that veterans and soldiers be treated as *humans*. Society rarely sees returning soldiers as humans, and this can have two sides to it. Many people view soldiers as heroes, but it is not uncommon for returning soldiers to be treated like criminals either. With both sides of this coin, the returning soldier is not treated as *human*. First, the concept of calling a returning soldier a hero can have detrimental unintended consequences. When members of society declare that soldiers and veterans are heroes, it is always out of respect and thanks for their service to the country. Yet, many soldiers “do not feel like heroes, but feel instead, a sense of personal failure or a deep ambivalence

about their service in war.”¹¹¹ Soldiers do not align with the archetype of the modern American superhero. Compare Superman to the stories above of people struggling with moral injury. With Superman, 1) “good” always wins, 2) Superman never has to kill and is fundamentally against killing 3) innocent lives are almost always saved. Most returning soldiers struggling with moral injury will not find themselves to meet the criteria of the modern hero. They have no superpowers, they could not save everyone, and they could not avoid killing. This is because *they are human*. Robert Emmet Meagher and Jonathan Shay both propose that today’s soldiers should be seen as Greek tragic heroes instead: broken, tormented, and mortal. This is not the common understanding of a hero though.

On the other side of the coin, soldiers also return home to intentionally negative sentiment. It is not uncommon for soldiers to feel “demonized by antiwar activists and pacifists who label them as unethical killing machines with no moral conscience.”¹¹² This description also does not line up with the above examples of soldiers struggling with moral injury. Simply stated, soldiers and veterans are humans. They are not more than human, and they are not less than human. This realization is crucial to giving them their humanity back. For a person to rejoin humanity, humanity has to offer an invitation and an extended hand, rather than the individual asking to rejoin the collective.

Another key aspect of healing, and possibly the most difficult to understand, is forgiveness. After a violation of moral conscience,

¹¹¹ Brock and Lettini, *Soul Repair*, 49.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 43.

is an individual allowed to tell him/herself “It’s okay,” and go back to normal life? Does that successfully end the pain of the guilt that people experience? Whether or not forgiveness is even possible is beyond the scope of this study. What is clear, however, is that individuals must forgive themselves. With moral injury, a person commits a violation against his/her own self; an outside party cannot offer meaningful forgiveness. Forgiveness is most probably the final frontier of the study of moral injury.

Of course, moral injury can be prevented, but its prevention must come from society as a whole. The ignorance of society and its tendency to act without thoughtful questioning must come to an end. Society cannot afford to agree to send soldiers to war, only to change its mind later. If war is to occur, then all of society is personally responsible for determining if it is truly a war worth fighting. *Humanity is at stake*. The personal sense of humanity that exists within the individuals fighting the war, the humanity that exists in the opposing side, and global humanity are all affected. Brock and Lettini articulate this sentiment extremely well:

The fact that many veterans live in anguish because of moral injury while most citizens still sleep comfortably at night is not evidence of a collective clean conscience. It is evidence of a lack of awareness and accountability. We cannot uphold our moral integrity by pleading an ignorance of facts, by claiming a war is legal, or by distancing ourselves from the leaders who declare a war. To treat veterans with respect means to examine our collective relationship to war with the same standards of courage and integrity veterans themselves have modeled.¹¹³

¹¹³ Ibid., 110.

All of society is collectively at fault for moral injury, and it will take all of society to recover from it.

War and the military are not the only systems applicable to the study of moral injury. Society is ignorant to many systems and happenings that inflict suffering upon others. With this, moral injury may occur when people finally wake up to the injustices of the food industry or the effects of pollution on the environment. With war, a veteran suicide rate of 22 deaths per day was necessary for society to begin to wake up. The question for the other systems that are harmful to humanity is “How much damage must be done before society becomes aware that something is wrong?” With all of these systems, the guilt is shared. Communal guilt means that no individuals are alone in this matter, and that society must act together to ever have a full recovery.

In a positive light, moral injury can be considered the beginning of healing. Sometimes when a bone is fractured, it must be completely broken so that it can heal properly. When society is ignorant to the systems that it supports, the bone is fractured. Moral injury, coming from the realization of a violated moral code, is when the bone is completely broken. When the systems of the body work together to heal that break, the body becomes whole once more. It is forever changed, but it is whole, and that bone is stronger because of the break.

Moral injury is studied because it matters, and the people who suffer from it are worth helping. The ultimate goal of the study of moral injury is to understand what afflicts many soldiers and veterans so deeply, so that they might eventually recover from it.

The shame, guilt, sorrow, and pain that come from the realization of a broken moral code are all signs of a normal and healthy conscience. This, in itself, is proof that humanity still exists. So, let us start here and listen to those who are broken. Let us hear their stories. Let us wake up to our own participation in the systems that pain them so much. When we do this, perhaps we can begin to heal together, redeeming and restoring humanity collectively.

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through
sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of gas-shells dropping softly behind.

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys! - An ecstasy of fumbling
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime. -
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,

Bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues, —
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*
Pro patria mori.¹¹⁴

Wilfred Owen
Dulce et Decorum Est

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