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'HOT TOPICS in Dark Times'

ECNP Traumatic Stress Network Online Meeting

Expert opinion

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'MORAL INJURY AND WAR'

Unfolding clinical issues

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Priest of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church,

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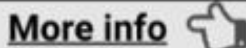
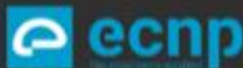


Meeting is open for everybody



Traumatic Stress
ECNP Network

My focus here, in the next twenty minutes, will be on Moral Injury. With only a little time to address so complex a concern, you and I know I will inevitably oversimplify my subject and leave many questions — yours and mine — unanswered.

The first thing to be made clear is that Moral Injury is not PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). In the popular press, media, and general public awareness, Moral Injury and PTSD are often identified or confused with each other, as if they were two names for the same reality. This is a crucial and consequential mistake, because Moral Injury and PTSD have different causes and manifestations, and call for different treatments. If we must deal in acronyms, Moral Injury might be designated as PTSR (Post-Traumatic Stress Response). Moral Injury is a natural response to trauma, in this case moral trauma. It is not a mental disorder. On the contrary, it is the absence of such a response that would represent a disorder. Next, the PTS elements in Moral Injury, the *trauma* and the *stress*, are different from those found in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

The Greek word τραῦμα, variously transliterated in myriad languages, signifies a wound or injury, and may be extended to denote a heavy blow, an assault, or even a defeat. What, then , is the particular nature of this injury? What has been injured? Where is the precise site of the wound? Put simply, Moral Injury is a *moral* injury. That is to say, not a bodily, psychic, or neurological injury. Moral Injury, as the name suggests, has to do with morality and conscience, with responsibility for the lives and deaths and sufferings of others, and with the consequences of our actions, what we have done, witnessed, been a part of or failed to prevent. Moral Injury is not "in our heads." It is at our human core.

In *The Descent of Man,* Charles Darwin concludes that "of all the differences between man (*sic*) and the lower animals the moral sense or conscience is by far the most important." In

the view of Dr. Michael Tomasello of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, "it is our morality that defines us as a species," and Harvard Psychologist Dr. Steven Pinker claims that our "morality is… close to our conception of the meaning of life. Moral goodness is what gives each of us the sense that we are worthy human beings." Put simply, it is our deeply ingrained sense of right and wrong that makes us unique — that separates us from every other animal — and this distinctiveness grants each of us our humanity. University of Chicago philosopher Martha Nussbaum has spoken eloquently to the "fragility of goodness," and perhaps nowhere is "goodness" — ours and others' — more fragile than in war, where the human stakes could not be higher. Indeed, as Gitta Sereny, author of *Into That Darkness*, has reminded us, our core moral selves are brittle, our goodness vulnerable to injury, and, in her words "If morality is extinguished there is no human being left." Many former combatants I have worked with speak of Moral Injury as a "soul wound." No matter that you may not "believe" in souls. "I didn't either," as one former terrorist told me. "I never thought I had a soul until I lost it."

As we can see and easily imagine, there is no wide agreement on how to indicate or what to call the site of the wound in Moral Injury. No X-ray, ultrasound, CT-scan, blood work, or MRI can locate or definitively label the invisible wound we call Moral Injury. We all use different words to tell ourselves and others "where it hurts" and "why it hurts." Those who suffer from Moral Injury variously speak of their wounded soul, their violated conscience, their fractured identity, their lost humanity, their broken compass, or their shattered core; and they can often tell you exactly when and how they did it or when and how it happened. Sometimes these wounds are self-inflicted, the fruit of our own actions or failure to act. Other times, the victims are only unlucky bystanders, whose wounds represent the collateral moral damage of living in dark times.

So what do moral wounds look like? How do they manifest themselves? Some of the most common post-traumatic stress responses to moral injury are: guilt, shame, outrage, remorse, depression, grief, alienation, mistrust, and despair. The "stress" or agony of the morally injured takes many forms, which may seem unwarranted or disproportionate to others, who may try to convince the wounded that they have nothing to feel guilty about or be ashamed of; that there is no reason to despair, to hide, to leave their life-work or abandon their lives. Absent here are the signature symptoms or syndromes of PTSD such as hypervigilance, startle reflex, memory loss, flashbacks, hallucinations, disassociation, emotional numbing, agitation. Moral injury, unlike PTSD, is not understood as a psychological or psychiatric disorder. It is, instead, an understandable response to the trespassing of a moral boundary, the violation of something sacred, essential, in us. The transgression that lies at the dark center of war is, of course, the killing of a fellow human being. "The last veil of human civility," explains Army LTC Steve Russell, "is the threshold of taking human life."

Moral Injury — make no mistake — is supposed to hurt. "What happens when our boys kill?" writes ex-Marine Captain Tyler Boudreau: "No matter how well we desensitize them, no matter how just the cause, the violence they inflict in battle will seep into their souls and cause pain. Even in self-defense, killing hurts the killer, too." "It should make you shake and sweat," adds Army Sergeant Brian Turner, " nightmare you, strand you in a desert of irrevocable desolation… it should break your heart to kill." And most of the time it does. It's when it doesn't that there's a problem. "We may never understand," writes Lt. Colonel Dave Grossman, a former Army Ranger, Paratrooper, and Professor at West Point…

> We may never understand the nature of the force in humankind that causes us to strongly resist killing fellow human beings; but we can be thankful for it. And although military leaders responsible for winning a war may be distressed

> by this force, as a species we can view it with pride. It is there, it is strong, and it gives us cause to believe that there may just be hope for humankind after all.

Although the war in Ukraine is the context for this discussion, war is far from the only arena in which Moral Injury is inflicted and suffered. Here I have in mind a tragedy that I shall never be able to forget, as it happened to a young family I once knew. I will tell the story as it was told to me. The four of them—two parents and their twin sons, five years of age at the time—came home from the movies on an unexceptional Saturday afternoon after having seen a swashbuckling adventure film of some sort, perhaps *Peter Pan*. The parents were resting before dinner and the two boys had gone downstairs to the family room to play, on fire to choose their parts and reenact their favorite sword-fighting scenes from the movie. After waving first their arms and then rolled-up newspapers at one another for a while, they stole up to the kitchen, fetched two more realistic blades from the knife rack, and descended to the play-room to resume battle. They had of course been told countless times never to go near knives (much less wield them at each other), but fantasy and excitement can wipe all that away. After minutes of harmless melée, it happened. One boy stretched out his blade at the very moment when the other boy, perched on a sofa cushion, lost his balance and fell forward. The knife pierced his chest and heart and he bled to death on the carpet at the feet of his twin.

An accident? Of course. Intended? Of course not. Anyone's fault? Yes, but the fault pales before its consequence. Every household kitchen has knives, and knives unlike guns are not usually kept under lock and key. The boys were careless and disobedient, but they were also mere children. No one meant this to happen, but that was little consolation to the mother, the father, and their five-year-old boy with his brother's blood on his hands, blood none of them seemed able to wash off. After months of isolation and trying to cope, the family moved away, far away. No one blamed them. Everyone pitied them. Everyone grieved. Then why did they seclude themselves in a cave of shame?

Why did they go into exile? They were morally injured at a time when few understood what that meant or knew how to help them.

Returning now to the context of war, it is important to realize that even those who have killed no one, never even fired their weapon, often suffer the agony of Moral Injury. But why? I have an only tentative suggestion to offer here, one formed after talking with a great many active duty service men and women and veterans who make this same claim. It has to do with what has been called the "kill switch" that any military must turn on in their recruits, the recalibration of conscience required to turn a civilian into a warrior. To be primed to kill, convinced of one's capacity and willingness to take life, and to have rehearsed the act until it is engrained, is in some real if elusive way to have already done the act and to have become a killer. This is precisely what a young Army reservist, whom I will call Sally, has painfully reported. Deployed to Iraq, Sally was trained as a convoy driver and was conditioned to run over anyone in her path. What most deeply troubled her was the fact that this included children, known to have been used by insurgents to slow down or stop military convoys and thus render them prey to ambush and massacre. "I had to convince myself and my superior officers," said Sally, "that I could or rather that I would — without any hesitation —speed up and drive straight over a child in such a situation." She practiced just this in active simulation and in her imagination, even in her dreams, until she was ready. As it happened the situation never arose and Sally never killed a child. Even so, she returned from Iraq desperately traumatized and suffering profoundly. To help others understand her inner pain, her soul wound, she explained that, before her National Guard unit was deployed to Iraq, she was a pre-school teacher. It was what she wanted to do with her life. It was how she saw herself. But "how can a trained killer of children do that?" It's her question, not mine. If we consider her confused, suffering from unreasonable guilt and shame, then it is we who are confused and who need to listen long and hard to the men and women whom we

have sent to wage our wars. We need to listen to the words of ex-Marine Karl Marlantes about his service: “The Marine Corps taught me to kill, but it didn’t teach me how to deal with killing,” and to the enraged and grieving mother of Noah Pierce, a young Iraq war veteran who killed himself in 2007: “The United States Army turned my son into a killer. They trained him to kill to protect others. They forgot to un-train him, to take that urge to kill away from him.”

Now, in the short time that remains, I need to address treatment — the path to recovery for the morally injured. Here I want to repeat and emphasize that Moral Injury is not a mental illness or psychiatric condition. Compared with PTSD, most treatment for Moral Injury may be said to be “low tech” and “drug free.” In this instance, the humanities arguably shed at least as much light as science. Jonathan Shay, a great humanist as well as an eminent psychiatrist, has demonstrated in his writings and practice that ancient wisdom can richly inspire and acutely guide the clinician in the healing of war wounds and other moral injuries. In *Odysseus in America*, the sequel to *Achilles in Vietnam*, Shay revealed how closely the war veterans he worked with may be said to have walked in the footsteps of Homer’s Odysseus. In mapping both Odysseus’s mythic sea journey from Troy to Ithaka and the all-too-real road home today from the front-line to family, Shay referenced the “Stages of Recovery” presented by Judith Herman in her classic text *Trauma and Recovery*:

1 • Safety, Sobriety, Self-care
2 • Constructing Personal Narrative and Grieving
3 • Reconnecting with people, communities, ideas and ambitions

If we had time now I would point out and stress how these stages closely mirror the road to recovery advocated and supported by Alcoholics Anonymous. It would be fruitful, as well, to compare both of these roadmaps with the protocols of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which in many respects embodied the ageless and essential elements of traditional African justice, whose aims are to bind up wounds, foster reconciliation, and restore community. What all of these

"therapies" have in common is what may be called their humanity, their roots in the reality of our human connectedness.

The "stage" I will focus on in the minutes that now remain is #2, the "construction of a personal narrative and grieving." Stage 1 is preliminary, as it were, to the task at hand. It is all about being ready to set out on the long journey home to self, family, and community. Only when I am safe and sound, no longer threatened by others or undermined by myself, can I go to where my darkest memories take me, confront the traumas that haunt and consume me, and like a quilter make the tatters whole again. Then share it — the grief, regret, guilt, shame, outrage, loss, sorrow — all of it. The truth is that story-telling is the super-power of the wounded and the broken. "All sorrows can be borne," Isak Dinesen tells us, "if you put them into a story or tell a story about them." To the veteran, whether soldier or civilian, in the words of Jonathan Shay, stories are "sacred stuff," a matter of life and death, a matter of survival. Stories bind wounds, re-knit the self, and reconstruct community. "That's the real obsession," writes Tim O'Brien in *The Things They Carried*. "All those stories. Not bloody stories necessarily. Happy stories too, and even a few peace stories… That's what stories are for… joining the past to the future. Stories are for those late hours in the night when you can't remember how you got from where you were to where you are. Stories are for eternity, when memory is erased, when there is nothing to remember except the story."

Our Paleolithic ancestors—hundreds of thousands of years ago if it was a day—carried their fire-kits with them everywhere they went, because survival depended on never being without fire or the capacity to kindle it. Fire brought light, safety, warmth, and the fellowship of the human circle. Today, our human survival depends on carrying our stories, stories that keep the most endangered parts of us alive. The human fire is always in danger of going out and not coming back, especially in war. We can all say with Albert Camus that "the years we have lived through have killed something

in us. And that something is simply the old confidence that humanity had in itself, which led us to believe that we could always elicit human reactions from each other if we spoke in the language of a common humanity." It is the human voice, the human imagination and its stories, that first create community. "There is no life without dialogue," wrote Camus in 1949. Without dialogue we die. Listening as long as it takes to each other's stories, patiently, without judgment, across all our differences and divisions — this is what fosters the recognition and acceptance that bring healing, not only to veterans but also to the communities that form around them.