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# Killing from the Inside Out

## Moral Injury and Just War

### ROBERT EMMET MEAGHER

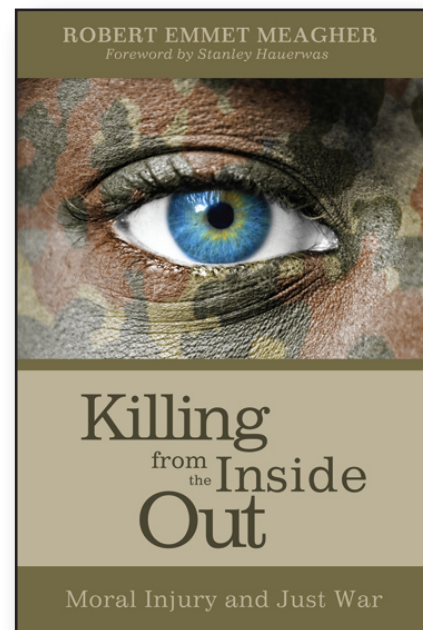
Foreword by Stanley Hauerwas • Afterword by Jonathan Shay

Armies know all about killing. It is what they do, and ours does it more effectively than most. We are painfully coming to realize, however, that we are also especially good at killing our own “from the inside out,” silently, invisibly. In every major war since Korea, more of our veterans have taken their lives than have lost them in combat. The latest research, rooted in veteran testimony, reveals that the most severe and intractable PTSD—fraught with shame, despair, and suicide—stems from “moral injury.”

But how can there be rampant moral injury in what our military, our government, our churches, and most everyone else call just wars? At the root of our incomprehension lies just war theory—developed, expanded, and updated across the centuries to accommodate the evolution of warfare, its weaponry, its scale, and its victims.

Any serious critique of war, as well as any true attempt to understand the profound, invisible wounds it inflicts, will be undermined from the outset by the unthinking and all but universal acceptance of just war doctrine. *Killing from the Inside Out* radically questions that theory, examines its legacy, and challenges us to look beyond it, beyond just war.

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**ROBERT EMMET MEAGHER**, Professor of Humanities at Hampshire College, Amherst, Massachusetts, has directed and participated in many events and programs concerned with understanding and healing the spiritual wounds of war in veterans, their families, and their communities. He served as an invited Commissioner for the National Truth Commission on Conscience in War and facilitates an ongoing MassHumanities/NEH VA Literature and Medicine seminar. His most recent book is *Herakles Gone Mad: Rethinking Heroism in an Age of Endless War*.

“Elegantly written and easily accessible to lay readers—his prose unburdened by any military jargon or acronym-soup—*Killing From the Inside Out* is an ideal read for anyone curious about American adventurism abroad, the future of civil-military relations, and the human—and moral—toll of war.”

—**Lionel Beehner**, founding editor of *Cicero Magazine* and member of the Council on Foreign Relations, New York City, NY

“Meagher has written the essential rebuttal to just war theory. This book should be read by scholars, warriors, clergy, politicians, and anyone caring for those suffering from moral injury related to military service.”

—**Kimberly P. May**, MD, Col (retired), USAF and the Veterans Administration, Leeds, MA

“Bob Meagher’s seminal and timely work, with its reach from antiquity to today, shows that there never was a just war that would leave its participants unscarred.”

—**Rev. Michael Lapsley**, director, the Institute for Healing Memories, Cape Town, South Africa

“I found this book gripping, illuminating, and prophetic. In a so-called civilized world, where we continue to accept all too easily the killing of innocents in war, and the sometimes devastating long-term impact on those young people we send into battle to kill on our behalf, it is utterly timely.”

—**Rev. Ruth Scott**, BBC broadcaster, international mediator, London, UK

“Meagher combines his own practical wisdom from many years of working with combat veterans with decades of high-quality scholarship. As a reflective practitioner, I strongly recommend this book to anyone truly interested in transforming the human cost of war.”

—**Wilhelm Verwoerd**, international peace and reconciliation worker, Beyond Walls, Cape Town Area, South Africa

“Another fundamental truth this bold, beautifully written, and erudite work powerfully conveys is the following: war kills not only those it buries in the ground; it just as surely kills those souls who march home, heads held high while the music plays and their loved ones cheer, yet feeling inside they are forever lost.”

—**Lieutenant Colonel Douglas A. Pryer**, US Army Intelligence, the Pentagon, USA

“Killing wounds the soul. But what if it’s a ‘just war’? Meagher argues convincingly that to put the adjective ‘just’ in front of the word ‘war’ is self-deception.”

—**Jim Forest**, co-founder, the Orthodox Peace Fellowship, South Bend, IN

“This is a thoughtful, timely, and needed book. . . . Read this book. Then ponder it. Then act on it. It just might save a soul—your soul!”

—**Thomas C. Fox**, publisher of the *National Catholic Reporter*

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# Killing from the Inside Out

Moral Injury and Just War

Robert Emmet Meagher

Foreword by  
Stanley Hauerwas

Afterword by  
Jonathan Shay



CASCADE Books • Eugene, Oregon

KILLING FROM THE INSIDE OUT  
Moral Injury and Just War

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Manufactured in the U.S.A.

For my grandchildren, Noah and Lucy

## They

The Bishop tells us: "When the boys come back  
They will not be the same; for they'll have fought  
In a just cause: they lead the last attack  
On Anti-Christ; their comrade's blood has bought  
New right to breed an honorable race.  
They have challenged Death and dared him face to face."  
"We're none of us the same!" the boys reply.  
"For George lost both his legs; and Bill's stone blind;  
Poor Jim's shot through the lungs and like to die;  
And Bert's gone syphilitic: you'll not find  
A chap who's served that hasn't found *some* change."  
And the Bishop said: "The ways of God are strange!"

—SIEGFRIED SASSOON

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## Foreword

**B**OB MEAGHER AND I were colleagues in the Department of Theology at the University of Notre Dame for a number of years beginning in 1970. I quite frankly did not know what to make of Meagher. He had been a Notre Dame undergraduate who, like many at that time, had been deeply influenced by Father John Dunne, CSC. Father Dunne, who recently died, was a legend on the campus of Notre Dame. Students poured into his courses because he was a person of great insight drawing on the literatures of the world to illumine what it means to be a human being. Meagher followed in Dunne's path, developing a way to think about our lives in a manner that challenged the disciplinary boundaries that make up the modern university. At the time I was a much more conventional thinker—thus my problem of not knowing what to make of Meagher.

Meagher left Notre Dame to teach at Hampshire College. That school seemed to be a perfect fit for Meagher because Hampshire was a school built on the presumption that if undergraduates were to get the education they needed to face the realities of our time the disciplinary divisions must be challenged. Because of his move to Hampshire, however, Meagher and I simply lost touch with one another—at least we lost touch until Meagher sent me this extraordinary book. I had no idea that he had spent so much time and scholarly attention on thinking through the moral challenges war entails.

So it is a great pleasure and honor that he has asked me to write the Foreword to his book. To be asked to write the Foreword not only reconnects us after years of not being in touch, but it also suggests over those same years we have come to share judgments I suspect we would not have

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*Foreword*

anticipated when we were colleagues at Notre Dame. I do not mean to suggest we agree about the morality or, if you prefer, the immorality of war, but I think the reader of this book who knows something of my account of war will find some deep continuities between Meagher and me.

In truth, Meagher's work on war continues to represent the kind of difference I suggested above characterized our intellectual differences when we were colleagues at Notre Dame. That is to say, Meagher continues to have a scholarly control of literatures I simply cannot pretend to know well. Thus one of the characteristics of this book is its ability to show how the way war is depicted in the literatures of Greece informs our current understanding of war. I can only admire his ability to utilize literatures that are normally not part of the discussions about the morality of war.

Those literatures, moreover, are quite important for the development of one of his major themes in this book. Without in any way trying to undercut the use of just war as a way to evaluate the morality of war, Meagher has directed our attention to what war does to combatants in order to help us better understand why war is such a problematic enterprise. Meagher takes no prisoners, but that does not mean his account of what participation in war does to soldiers is not extremely important. Drawing on literatures of many cultures, Meagher helps us see how the very imaginative possibility that I may have to kill someone constitutes a challenge to our everyday morality that is not easily integrated into an ongoing way of life.

I need to make sure there is no misunderstanding about what I have just written. I do not mean to suggest to the reader that Meagher has failed to provide an account of the development of just war theory. The exact opposite is the case, as he has given us a tour of the development of just war theory that will be of great use for those who find just war reflection crucial for any attempt to better understand the morality of warfare. His account of the relation of the church's development of an ethics of sex and just war alone is worth the price of the book. His account of the role of Ambrose in the development of just war reflection is a genuine contribution to our knowledge that, as far as I know, no one has developed with the depth he has.

I am convinced his emphasis on what war does to combatants is a decisive intervention that helps us better understand the morality of war. As a person committed to Christian nonviolence, I fear that many assume a commitment to nonviolence carries with it a negative judgment against those who participate in war. Meagher challenges that presumption



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by helping us see that those who dissent from war and those who have participated in war share more in common than the stereotype of either would suggest. That war wounds us morally is not only true of those who prosecute the violence of war; it is true of all whom war touches.

Toward the end of this book Meagher quotes Camus to the effect that the years they have gone through, referring to the years of interwar Europe, “have killed something in us.” Drawing on a wide range of literature, Meagher helps us, warrior and pacifist alike, to discover what war has done to us. He concludes his book with the strong claim that just war theory has been a cover for the support of war without in any decisive way limiting the violence of war. That is a challenge that hopefully those committed to just war will take seriously.

I began by locating my early relationship to Meagher, noting at the time I was not quite sure what to make of him as a person or a thinker. I am not sure our reconnecting after so many years means I now have a better grasp of the character of his intelligence. But I do know one thing: he possesses a courage that enables him to challenge the myths that surround war with a bracing honesty that is as powerful as it is unusual. I sincerely hope this book will find a wide readership.

Stanley Hauerwas

Author of *War and the American Difference:  
Theological Reflections on Violence and National Identity*;  
Gilbert T. Rowe Professor Emeritus of Divinity and Law,  
Duke University

## Preface

“WHAT I’VE TRIED TO do, very frankly,” asserted Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta testifying at a joint hearing of the House Armed Services and Veterans Affairs committees in late September 2012, “is to make sure that . . . all of the military leadership kick ass on this issue.”<sup>1</sup> The “issue” preying on him was not the defeat of the Taliban or the extermination of al-Qaeda, much less contingency planning for feared budget cuts. No, the issue Panetta had in mind and labeled a “top Pentagon priority” was the runaway suicide rate in the military, averaging thirty-three suicides per month in 2012, roughly one every seventeen hours. Even this number—representing confirmed suicides among active-duty troops—falls far short of the dark truth. Off the Department of Defense’s map and spreadsheets are the veterans who, weeks or months or years after their war service, take their lives, often without much national or even local notice. Here the numbers are even more shocking—twenty-two a day in February 2013, nearly one every hour. Then there are the uncounted other deaths among veterans that result from clearly self-destructive behavior, but for a range of reasons are either not seen or reported as suicides. And what of the broken survivors, the legions of others whose lives, though spared in combat, have sprung so many leaks that they spend the rest of their days and nights just staying afloat?

While we were meant to be reassured and hopeful in the news that our Defense Secretary and the military leadership was “on this,” we were and are entitled to doubt that this is a crisis that can be resolved by “kicking ass,” which the Pentagon admittedly knows how to do. The reality is that the

1. Zoroya, “Military Leaders,” 1.

military and the Veterans Administration, in particular, have been aware of this crisis for decades, ever since Vietnam, with little result. For all their doubtlessly sincere concern, the military elite appear at a loss to stanch the flow of self-shed blood in their ranks. They speak of the enormous stress of multiple deployments, the rising incidence of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), and the hidden torments of traumatic brain injury. These are the categories of generals and staff clinicians, concerned above all to maintain troop strength and battle-readiness. To begin to grasp the crisis at hand they need instead to take their eyes off the numbers and to look instead straight into the eyes of one man or woman at a time, someone far below them in rank, someone who has not yet gone dark in death but is daily going dark in life. Even more they need to listen for hours, days, even years—as long as it takes—until they understand what is going so terribly wrong.

Our military, any military, knows all about killing the enemy. It is what they do, and our forces do it more effectively than most. What we are painfully coming to realize, however, is that we are also especially good at killing our own, killing them “from the inside out,” silently, invisibly. This is the way the mother of Noah Pierce explained what the army and the war did to her son so that he could imagine nothing better to do with his life than to end it. What brought Noah, a veteran of two deployments in Iraq, to this point was no mystery to his mother. It was an atrocity. The military knows all about body count, but neither understands nor acknowledges “soul count.” Kicking ass will get us nowhere as a nation. Searching our soul is more to the point, and this is what this book sets out to do.

*Killing from the Inside Out* is the work of years—years of reading and years of listening—nearly fifty years, in fact, of research, teaching, activism, and advocacy. It is a profoundly personal work for me, because war invaded my life and family many years ago and, like an army of occupation, has never truly left. I find no fascination in war, only grief and responsibility. For most of my seventy years I have been aware of its wreckage, especially human wreckage, and have wanted to play some small part in closing and healing the wounds it inflicts, especially those wounds inflicted so deeply that they can hide even as they kill. From the start it has been a search for understanding, because without it we are useless, just as I am convinced the military is useless or worse in their mostly blind and misdirected efforts to address the suicide epidemic in their ranks. Above all else I resolved to listen, long and hard, and with an open mind and heart, to how veterans describe and self-diagnose their inner pain, darkness, and desolation,

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trusting that they know best their own condition. To my surprise, in all this, I have found that on many occasions my tentative responses—drawn from my own scholarship and experience—to others’ experiences and stories proved revealing and helpful; so we passed together from monologue to dialogue, from narrative to discussion. And, at first imperceptibly, this book was conceived.

The actual birth of my project occurred during a particular conversation several years ago with a close friend, an ex-Marine captain who served in Iraq and took part in the invasion of Fallujah. He talked and I listened as he argued that any serious critique of war—past, present, or future—was and is and will be undermined before it starts by the unthinking and all but universal acceptance of just war doctrine. He went on to say that the just war theory has to be taken down, discredited, revealed for the lie that it is, and, he added, looking at me, “You’re the one to do it.” This was a challenge that I could not easily dismiss. So I went to work.

Why would a Marine officer and combat veteran, we might ask, put out a “hit” on the just war theory? What is this “theory” anyway and why does it matter so much? The deceptive and destructive core of the Christian just war doctrine can be stated very simply. It is the claim that wars, or at least some wars, and all the killing and destruction they entail, are—in addition to being necessary—good and right, even virtuous and meritorious, pleasing in the sight of God. This calls for a new species or category of homicide: “killing” that is radically distinct from “murder,” a distinction that hadn’t previously existed in Christian ethics. “Murder” violates the will of God and darkens the soul of the murderer, but the other, “new” kind of killing doesn’t. The difference lies not in the level of violence, death, suffering, and destruction involved but in the “intention” of the killer. If the intention is to do the will of God, which the tradition identifies as the will of the church and its ordained spokesmen or else the will of a legitimate secular sovereign authority, and if all that is done is done with “love,” or at least not in hate, then there can be no moral injury because there has been no moral infraction, no sin. If the intention is pure, all is well in heaven and so on earth.

The origin of this foundational claim lay not in the New Testament, nor in early Christian theology and practice, but rather in a practical necessity and political convenience. Once the Christian church found itself in a position of power, which is to say that once the Roman Empire became the Holy Roman Empire, the exercise of lethal force and the waging of war,

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that is, killing, became its ecclesiastical responsibility. In fact, service in the army, the imperial legions, was confined to baptized Christians. How, then, could the Christian church say that military service was sinful? How could it maintain and deploy an army of Christians whose very service put their souls at peril? A pacifist church was one thing, but a pacifist Christian empire was something very different, and untenable. Augustine, and his mentor Ambrose, both of whom had once aspired to a secular career in the imperial service, came up with the solution, a new theory of war and killing that would not only permit but endorse killing for “God and Country,” as it were. It was from the beginning a doctrine of convenience—conceived, promulgated, and perpetuated by men who themselves, as clerics, men of God, would personally eschew service in the military and the conduct of war. They and their successors in the tradition would readily raise a hand to bless the troops but never themselves lift a hand to wield a sword. There would be no blood on their hands. War and killing, now blessed, soon became not the lesser of two evils but a positive good.

Invented in a theological lab, just war and virtuous killing, as soon as they were tested in the field, proved useful for some and devastating to others. The “others” were the combatants, the killers and their victims. The shocking truth was that the “side effects” of just war on these unordained others were of little concern. Not even civilian casualties, however massive, were finally allowed to question its efficacy. Church and state were not about to condemn war, any more than they are today, not at least *their* wars; so war had to be good. Or rather, “our” wars had to be good, and those who serve in them do no wrong, ever, so long as they serve the cause and follow orders. Every war is just, from the perspective of those waging it, and every killer is a hero, to the side they are on. That is the wall our veterans still run up against today. They are expected to deny their own pain, ignore what war has taught them, and take up their civil status as heroes. The rest is supposedly “in their heads,” or more precisely in their brains, and there are on offer perfectly good drugs to deal with that. From the beginning of the just war tradition, the powers-that-be needed their wars, and so they created their heroes. Nothing about that has changed, including the confusion and resentment of the returning warrior at the reception he comes home to. It “baffle[s] him,” writes Kevin Powers, an Iraq war veteran and author of the acclaimed novel *The Yellow Birds*, “because he immediately remembers what he has actually done, the acts of violence he’s committed for which he’s being thanked, and it just doesn’t make sense. And he doesn’t get to hide

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from the fact that he must account for what he's done."<sup>2</sup> The truth is that just war theory has never made sense to those with blood on their hands nor to those whose blood it was. But their voices have mattered little and could be ignored until now.

The reason, then, why just war doctrine lies at the root of our complacency with war as well as our inability to comprehend the fact of our military "heroes" marching off to take their own lives is that so long as we cling to the moral justification of our wars we remain blind to the moral injury they inflict. Taking on the millennia-old tradition of just war, however, is no slight task. We are, after all, attached to it, invested in it as a nation. It is a lie that has deep and deeply revered roots, particularly in Christian belief, and must be torn up by those roots rather than felled with a single whack.

Uprooting an elaborate, longstanding lie, told and retold across millennia, demands a journey back into time. "If you don't know history, you don't know anything. You're a leaf that doesn't know it's part of a tree."<sup>3</sup> Today's stories of suicide and moral injury are only the latest expression of a much older story. Their rarely examined roots reach deep into the history of war and its consequences. If we don't know how the stories we live and tell today are connected to the story of the past, we don't know anything. In the words of Goethe, "If anyone is unable to give an account of three thousand years of human history, he lives in darkness, inexperienced. He lives from day to day."<sup>4</sup> When each new day brings another veteran suicide, we can no longer afford to live from day to day, confused and uncomprehending.

This book, from cover to cover, is a conversation across time, as it must be, because the understanding sought and shared here does not finally belong to any one time, any more than do war and the profound moral injury it inflicts on all who wage it. It is all about listening to stories—some from today and some from the past—because the present is never without roots and the past is never really past. Military suicide today is not some undecipherable, modern or even postmodern, aberration, without deep roots in our shared human past. Rather, it is the lamentable legacy of a long tradition of justified war and inevitable moral injury.

As it is mostly used today, the term "moral injury" designates the violation, by oneself or another, of a personally embedded moral code or

2. Williams, "Writing Differently," 3.
3. These words are widely attributed to Michael Crichton, but I have never seen them traced to a specific source in his writings.
4. Cited in Jonas, "Change and Permanence," 526. The translation here is mine.

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value resulting in deep injury to the psyche or soul. It is what used to be called sin. The haunting question raised and pursued relentlessly in this book is “how can there be moral injury in a just war?” The traditional and mostly unquestioned answer is that there can’t be. The idea that dutiful service to one’s country in a just war can be simply “wrong,” putting at risk one’s humanity and very soul, is blasphemous and unthinkable to nearly everyone except those who have experienced it to be the case. It is an idea that many or most veterans are unwilling to express, for they know the anger and resentment they will provoke with their words. Timothy Kudo, a Marine captain who served in both Iraq and Afghanistan, learned this when he submitted a piece to the *Washington Post*, in January 2013, titled “I Killed People in Afghanistan. Was I Right or Wrong?” This was a question that on his own admission he never examined or resolved until his return home. “We were simply too busy,” he explained, “to worry about the morality of what we were doing.”<sup>5</sup> Now, however, he thinks about it every day, because he knows and lives with the “ethical damage” that killing does to the killer, which he admits “may be worse than the physical injuries we sustain.”<sup>6</sup> The best he can do is to say that “killing is always wrong, but in war it is necessary.”

As was soon made vociferously clear, Timothy Kudo’s “best” was not good enough for some armchair patriots back home, who support the troops, welcome them home, and don’t want to hear what they have done or learned. Thanks for your service, but no thanks for your comments. Perhaps understandably, Kudo’s brief, honest, and heart-wrenching admission that the killing he did for his country was wrong—not because the war was unjust but because killing is always wrong—spawned a storm of outrage and dismissal. One particularly offensive response to Kudo was an article that soon appeared in the *National Review*, entitled “A Morally Confused Marine,” in which the author said that he has “to wonder why, given his belief that killing is always wrong, Timothy Kudo ever enlisted in the Marines.”<sup>7</sup> The fact is that when Kudo enlisted the morality of killing was not on his mind. It was a question he hadn’t yet asked. It was the experience and inner aftermath of killing that raised the question and brought him to where he is now. He learned from doing, rather than from reading. The fact

5. Kudo, “I Killed People,” 1.

6. *Ibid.*, 2.

7. Prager, “Morally Confused,” 2.

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is that Captain Kudo, far from succumbing to moral confusion, has come to moral clarity, the moral clarity that is the core aspiration of this book.

Timothy Kudo is not alone in his clarity. The telling truth is that a great many combat veterans, having followed all the rules, are haunted more by what they have done than by what they have endured in war. Those who work with veterans to help heal their inner, invisible wounds know that the deepest and most intractable PTSD has its roots in what veterans perceive as the evil they have done and been a part of. They all too often see themselves as criminals, not because they have committed war crimes but because they have become convinced by their own experience of the essential criminality of war. Needless to say this is a conviction that neither the military nor the government is prepared to hear and take seriously. “Kicking ass” does not include facing the possibility that all killing kills something in the killer and that, as a result, there is no such thing as killing without dying, a false promise that has defined the strategy and propaganda of Western war-makers ever since Alexander mesmerized the world with his winner-take-all conquests. The untold stories of those conquests belong to his warriors and their victims, who know that killing is all about dying, even for those who walk away from war seemingly alive and unscathed.

Timothy Kudo, make no mistake, is not a pacifist. He was in his *Post* piece and has been in his many subsequent responses and interviews unmistakably clear that he believes that killing is necessary in war. Necessary—not the same as honorable, praiseworthy, or even right. He has made equally clear that he remains a Marine, that he is prepared to do his duty, follow the orders given him, and that he is proud of his service to the Corps and his country. What makes him different from his unthinking, or should we say confused, critics is that he knows and bears the cost of that service. He knows what killing has done and will do to him. “War makes us killers,” he writes. “We must confront this horror directly if we’re honest about the true costs of war. . . . I’m no longer the ‘good’ person I once thought I was. There’s nothing that can change that; it’s impossible to forget what happened, and the only people who can forgive me are dead.”<sup>8</sup> Timothy Kudo is thankfully one of the survivors. Countless others, like Noah Pierce, who have expressed or thought these same words, are gone. All the more reason for listening to Kudo and to other wounded prophets like him, instead of dismissing him, as Dennis Prager did, saying that Kudo’s “moral compass”

8. Kudo, “I Killed People,” 2.



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was broken and in need of recalibration, that is, in need of being put in sync with just war doctrine.

Since the time of Constantine, the first Christian emperor, and of Augustine, the first theologian to develop a Christian defense of war, just war doctrine has served to license and legitimize state and ecclesiastical violence and to draw a convenient, if imaginary, line between killing and murder. It has come to be assumed that the Bible tells us so, and Augustine never tired of reminding us of this. The Bible, however, says no such thing. The fact that the Bible, in Exodus, uses more than one word for killing is true, but it is equally true that it uses them interchangeably. Augustine didn't read Hebrew, and he knew less Greek than most of my beginning students. What he did know was what he wanted the Bible to say, about how murder is one thing and killing is another, and how God's commandments prohibit the one and not the other. And that was enough for his purpose, which was to justify killing, as well as less-than-lethal uses of violence, including torture. Yes, it was not John Yoo who first justified torture in the United States. Augustine beat him to it by sixteen centuries, at least for adherents to just war doctrine, a vast cohort including nearly everyone today. The lone dissenters—mostly veterans and members of various “peace churches” such as the Quakers, Mennonites, Amish, and Church of the Brethren—together make up perhaps 1 percent of us.

After each of the “great wars” of the twentieth century, when the nations of the world entertained the possibility of a world without war and came together to try to make that happen, promising to outlaw war once and for all, it was the doctrine of just war, the birthright and bequest of the Catholic Church, long since discredited and discarded by international lawyers and the family of nations, that was revived and reenlisted in the nick of time to drape in some “legitimacy” the American wars of the last five decades in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq, as well as the less easily designated endless war on terror. While we may wonder how much this legitimacy is really worth, it was enough for President Barack Obama to feel secure in invoking the just war theory in his, of all things, Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech and in defending his targeted assassinations in Pakistan and elsewhere, by reassuring a skeptical world and American citizenry that he studies and follows to the letter the just war teachings of Augustine and Aquinas. How is it in that case, we might ask, that the drone pilots in his just war, who do their fighting and killing in the risk-free, climate-controlled security of their cubicles in Nevada and northern Virginia,

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suffer the same or worse levels of trauma, guilt, and shame as their more front-line comrades in Helmand Province? This is but one strand in our story, and but one of the questions and contradictions I set out to examine and unravel in the central narrative and argument of this book.

The aim of this book is, then, to pull up, from its roots, the just war tradition, to reveal its deadly legacy, and to point to a future beyond just war. To move beyond just war, however, is not the same as moving beyond war. Two eminent men of conscience in the twentieth century—Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Albert Camus, one a Christian theologian and the other an avowed agnostic—were convinced of this. Both refused to distinguish between killing and murder and to justify killing. Yet both, in the face of the evil that was the Third Reich, advocated and embraced the sword, Camus in the Resistance and Bonhoeffer in the effort to assassinate Hitler. Neither man was morally confused, or for that matter morally innocent. They knew that killing is always wrong but accepted quite grudgingly that it is sometimes—in dark times—necessary, as the lesser of two evils. Moving beyond just war, in the first place, means renouncing any effort to justify the war one wages and to accept, therefore, the moral consequences, the moral injury, of such engagement. Then, in that place of despondent darkness, there will one day come the renunciation of all war. Otherwise, as has been realized, perhaps for the first time, by my generation, the children of Oppenheimer, we are all lost.

For this reason, among many, I look to our nation's combat veterans for the prophetic vision, courage, and conviction that will be needed for us to take the first steps beyond war and to undertake the novel challenge of establishing and maintaining peace without arms, without killing. Augustine once wrote that without darkness we cannot know or relish light, and without evil we won't know or love the good. Vietnam veterans had their own way of putting this with respect to their experience of darkness and evil: "If you didn't go, you don't know." But they, like today's veterans, do know, in their bones, in their souls, that every war should be our last, no matter the cost. And we need to listen to and learn from them, which is ultimately what I have tried to do in writing this book.

Therefore I begin my thanks with all of the many veterans of war and conflict who have in their spoken and written words tried to teach us what we need to know. I regret, and at the same time am thankful, that these teachers are too numerous for me to count, much less to name here. To acknowledge these debts would be a book in itself, and even then I would

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inevitably leave someone out. Better to acknowledge more simply that my work is born of reading and, even more, of listening, and I just hope I have been faithful to all of the pain, wisdom, and trust that have been shared with me in those exchanges. Lastly, in dedicating this book to my grandchildren, Noah and Lucy, I have in mind all the world's children with whom they will live and grow old, sharing a planet ever smaller, more precious, and more imperiled. May they all together, hand in hand, embrace peace and pass it on, along with life, to their children.

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## Introduction

### *Moral Injury Then and Now*

**T**HAT WE LIVE TODAY in an age of endless war is a mantra intoned so often as to keep an easily distracted nation ever-mindful that it needs to be vigilant, even preemptive, and above all aggressively armed. War has become our natural posture, our national default position, and we are more or less comfortable with it and its consequences. After all, our lives go on as we feel they should without grave risk or injury, provided we belong to the 99 percent who never see the face of war up front. That honor, as we like to think of it, belongs to our men and women in arms, our heroes, whom we thank for their service and for whom we tie yellow ribbons and all too often lower our flags halfway.

It is a more careless than truly grateful nation, however, that watches and applauds its sons and daughters as they go off to war and return, and yet fails to notice or care for long that they come back different and often desperate. The fact that the majority of their wounds are invisible is no excuse. What we cannot see we can still come to know through listening.

Fortunately, not all combat veterans return from war with wounds to their bodies or to their souls. But many do, too many. Those who come back without limbs or eyes, those who will never work or even walk again, often or maybe even most of the time receive the care they deserve; but those who come back without a scar—silent, hollowed out, shadowed, and overlooked until they take their agony out on themselves or others—rarely find

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recognition, much less healing. Yet what would healing mean for them? For the most part, we as a nation haven't a clue, and there are reasons for that. One of the central tasks of this book will be to examine the reasons why the moral torment of so many veterans mostly falls on deaf ears.

It may be that the question simply makes no sense to those who have thought little and experienced even less of war. How, for example, can those who have served their country, risked death and injury, observed the rules of war, and followed orders—in what the president of the United States, Barack Obama, in his 2009 Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech labeled a morally justified use of violence—be in need of spiritual healing or “repentance”? Repentance for what? The clergy, and their congregations with them, regardless of faith or denomination,<sup>1</sup> rarely perceive the possibility of sin in national service. Most of them long ago accepted one or other version of the traditional just war theory, regularly revised and recalibrated across the centuries to certify the moral legitimacy of lethal violence, provided certain conditions are met. Meeting those conditions is, most everyone assumes, the responsibility of the White House and the Pentagon, not that of individual citizens who need to take their government at its word. In general, pastors on the home front, like chaplains in the combat zone, support the troops, as they should, as well as everything the troops are commanded to do, which they arguably should not. The truth is that a great many combat veterans, having followed all the rules, are haunted more by what they have done than by what they have endured in war. Those who work with veterans to help heal their inner, invisible wounds know that the deepest and most intractable PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) has its roots in what veterans perceive as the evil they have done and been a part of. They all too often see themselves as criminals, not because they have committed war crimes but because they have become convinced by their own experience of the essential criminality of war. Needless to say this is a conviction that neither the military nor the government is prepared to hear and take seriously.

To whom, then, if not to the clergy, can the morally injured, spiritually desolate veteran turn? The ranks of secular caregivers attending to those suffering from invisible wounds are filled by therapists and counselors with one or other cluster of qualifying letters after their names—psychiatrists,

1. As I have already stated in the Preface, those denominations known as the “peace churches”—Quakers, Mennonites, Amish, Church of the Brethren—are clear exceptions to this generalization, as are many American Buddhists; and all of these combined represent far less than 1 percent of the U.S. population, as do the military.

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clinical psychologists, and social workers and psychiatric mental health nurses. Armed with the latest edition of the DSM, *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, and informed by the vast clinical literature addressing battle trauma, what they see in and hear from their patients more often than not looks like and sounds like classic, standard, well-documented PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) or TBI (traumatic brain injury), and they proceed accordingly in weighing their treatment options. Some of these caregivers, however, especially those who have listened longer and more openly to their patients, have begun to question whether they truly grasp the source and extent or even the nature of their patients' suffering. When combat veterans speak to them of the impenetrable darkness in which they now live out their days, much less their nights, or try to convey the shame and guilt that consumes them, psychiatrists may well and often do question whether the most appropriate solution is to whip out their Rx pads. When veterans, even those not previously or particularly religious, report that their souls are dead or that they have lost their humanity and want it back, many MDs and PhDs on the frontlines of veteran care rightly wonder why they are the ones to be hearing this. But if not they, then who? With no ready answer to this question at hand, they do their best, often generously overstepping their professional training and/or personal beliefs and disbeliefs to acknowledge the obvious suffering of others and to just be there to listen.

The inner damage and pain that even the most qualified and concerned caregivers hesitate to address is what many today diagnose as “moral injury.”<sup>2</sup> Moral injury is not a new concept, much less a new reality, as will become painfully clear in the course of this book. All that is relatively recent is the term “moral injury,” freshly minted in the minds of psychiatrists, therapists, and counselors. Today we find it in wide circulation among

2. In fact, it was Dr. Jonathan Shay, MD, PhD—a pioneer and luminary in the effort to address the all too often catastrophic inner wounds suffered by military men and women in conflict—who first entered this term into public discourse. His definition of moral injury—“betrayal of ‘what’s right’ in a high-stakes situation by someone who holds power”—was much more inclusive than that operative in most public forums today. What has been lost in this common bracketing of moral injury is a matter of foundational importance and of central concern to Dr. Shay: the corrosive abuse of power within the military, involving a culture of what he has labeled “leadership malpractice.” While I share Dr. Shay’s concern here, it is admittedly not the focus of this book and is a subject that I am in no way qualified to address. I can, however, urge the reader to explore his seminal discussion of moral injury in *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming*.

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veterans and their professional caregivers, as well as in psychiatric journals, government reports, church pulpits, and the national media. More to our present purpose, it facilitates an inquiry and discussion such as this one, providing a common point of entry into a place that is both dark and painful, a place where many veterans find themselves suffering in confusion and despair, a place where nearly everyone else is reluctant to go. “Moral injury” has most commonly come to mean the transgression, the violation, of what is right, what one has long held to be sacred—a core belief or moral code—and thus wounding or, in the extreme, mortally wounding the psyche, soul, or one’s humanity. As with so many concepts for which definitions fall short, moral injury is most clearly seen and understood in stories.

The story to which we first turn to illustrate and understand moral injury is but one of countless tragic stories of war and return, past and present. It is also a possibly familiar story made public in a number of media accounts and notably featured in a recent (2011) documentary titled *Wartorn 1861–2010*. It is the heartbreaking story of Noah Pierce<sup>3</sup> who, with his mother’s reluctant consent, enlisted in the U.S. Army at the age of seventeen and less than two years later found himself in the vanguard of the March 2003 Iraq invasion. Four years later he sat alone in his pickup truck in Gilbert, Minnesota, put a gun to his head, and ended the life that had for him become unendurable. Scribbled on the back of an NRA pistol-safety certificate were these words to his mother:

Mom, I am so sorry. My life has been hell since March 2003 when I was part of the Iraq invasion. . . . I am freeing myself from the desert once and for all. . . . I am not a good person. I have done bad things. I have taken lives. Now it’s time to take mine.<sup>4</sup>

In the words of a close family friend, Noah was “too sensitive” and “too caring” to go to war and ever come back whole. Those words proved prophetic. He came back different, darkened, broken, haunted. In his letters home, Noah had described many of the “bad things” that he had witnessed and done in Iraq, as fear turned to anger and anger turned to hatred. He took some lives by accident, like the child he crushed under his Bradley Fighting Vehicle, but others he took deliberately, like the unarmed man he shot in the forehead at point-blank range or the last person he killed, a

3. Unless otherwise attributed, in the ensuing discussion of Noah Pierce, I am reliant upon Gilbertson, “The Life and Lonely Death of Noah Pierce.”

4. See Alpert and Goosenberg, *Wartorn*.

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doctor, at a checkpoint. “He couldn’t forgive himself for some of the things he did,” explains his mother:

And he thought of himself as a murderer, and a bad person, because he still had the urge to hurt people, kill people. 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.<sup>5</sup>

Noah Pierce was not a war criminal, only a warrior who served his country as well as he knew how. After two deployments in Iraq he was given an honorable discharge from the army and returned home to a grateful nation. In the eyes of those who knew little or nothing of what he knew, he was a hero, an accolade he wanted no part of. “So tell me,” he wrote to his mother while still in Iraq, “how we are heroes.”<sup>6</sup> Until he shot himself, Noah Pierce bore no physical wound, no sign of injury. His kind of wound, his mother explains, “kills you from the inside out.”<sup>7</sup> His kind of wound is what we mean by moral injury, and although this book will not pretend to probe the psychological layers of moral injury, much less prescribe therapies for its healing, it will reveal its roots. And to do that we must trace the Western history of moral injury in war back to its recorded beginnings in ancient Greece and follow its path through the Christian centuries to modern Europe and contemporary America.

The tragedy of Noah Pierce finds an early precursor in a war drama written and enacted twenty-five centuries ago about a war that was already at the time ancient history. I have in mind a seldom read and still more seldom staged play entitled *Philoctetes* that the classical Greek playwright Sophocles wrote in his old age, at eighty-seven to be exact, after a long life not only in the theater of Dionysus but also in the theater of war. He had so far survived several wars on Greek soil and served in at least two of them, twice elected to the rank of *strategos* or “general.” This is to say that in depicting war and its wounds Sophocles knew well what he was talking about. More specifically, he could not have been a stranger to moral injury; for he knew firsthand the intimate face-to-face savagery of ancient warfare, especially the protracted Greek-on-Greek civil warfare of the Peloponnesian War, notorious for its indiscriminate brutality and civilian carnage.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.



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As Sophocles composed and staged *Philoctetes*, the Peloponnesian War was in its twenty-second year. Although he set the action of the play in the hoary past of the Trojan War, Sophocles wrote to the current war that Athenians knew all too well. It was conventional and convenient for tragic playwrights to don the masks of myth and legend when confronting their contemporaries with inconvenient truths. The past was, or seemed, safe, even entertaining, until like a mirror it reflected its audience. Stories worth telling are like that. They take us up and away into another reality before bringing us back to ourselves, eyes wide open. They promise escape, and give us truth instead. “The truth,” wrote the Greek philosopher Heraclitus, “likes to hide.”<sup>8</sup> And we surely like to hide from it. But there was no hiding from truth in the theater, the *theatron*, as the Greeks called it, which meant “the seeing place, the place of vision.”

When the curtain, as it were, lifts on *Philoctetes*, the Trojan War is well into its tenth year, and for the Greeks it appears unwinnable. The dead may not yet outnumber the living, but they surely put them to shame. The best of the Greeks, their shining heroes, lie buried, while their lessers—most notably the politicians and posers—wander the Greek camp wondering what went wrong. This comes as no surprise to the wizened Philoctetes, who undoubtedly speaks for his maker when he says: “War never takes the bad man but by chance, the good man always” (436–37).<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, at least according to the prophet Helenus, one chance remains for a Greek victory at Troy, and that chance is embodied in the bent and broken castaway, Philoctetes.

Greek victory at Troy, however, is far from our present concern and so is the full unfolding of *Philoctetes*' plotline. As it happens, the pivotal character of the play is not Philoctetes but rather a young boy named Neoptolemus, the son of the dead hero Achilles. He is the war's latest and most celebrated recruit, and by a twist of fate the war's outcome will depend on him. The fact is that he knows nothing about war, and he never really knew his illustrious father. He is as green as he is eager to go to war. His father's son, he wants to do his part. The tragedy is that his honorable, if irascible, father is no longer alive to teach him his part. Instead, the ever-scheming Odysseus steps in and pretends to fill a father's shoes. Odysseus sees only

8. Heraclitus, fragment 123, in Kirk and Raven, *Presocratic Philosophers*, 193. Translation mine.

9. These and subsequent numbers in parentheses indicate line numbers in the David Grene translation of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*.

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opportunity in Neoptolemus' innocence and inexperience. He knows he can use him to accomplish his end, and the boy will be none the wiser until it is too late for him to know better.

The drama of *Philoctetes* is about betrayal and violation and the moral pain and confusion they leave in their wake. It is enough for us to know that the young Neoptolemus no sooner reports for duty than he is assigned a mission by Odysseus that contradicts his moral code, his sense of what is right, violates everything he has been taught about honor. A mere boy, fresh from the best of homes, he is well reared but as yet untested. This is his first test in an unfamiliar world where his deeds, not his words, will define him. His premonition and fear are that what he does now will determine his character, his direction in life. Odysseus, for his part, is no fool. He knows what the boy before him is feeling and fearing. Like Sophocles, Odysseus may even recognize himself in Neoptolemus, remembering a moment long ago when he had the same fears. A man of many words and few deeds, a man with a "shabby slit-eyed soul" (1013), Odysseus knows just what to say:

I know, young man, it is not your natural bent  
To say such things nor to contrive such mischief.  
But the prize of victory is pleasant to win.  
Bear up: another time we shall prove honest.  
For one brief shameless portion of a day  
Give me yourself, and then for all the rest  
You may be called most scrupulous of men. (79–85)

In response, Neoptolemus proves no match for his mentor. He tries to hold his moral ground but soon yields, all but inevitably. "I recognize," he admits to Odysseus, "that I was sent with you to follow your instructions. I am loath to have you call me a traitor" (93–95). His moral principles are reduced to personal preferences, and Odysseus, whose confessed aim "in everything is to win" (1052), does just that here. He owns Neoptolemus for the moment, and the moment is all he needs.

Later in the play, when Neoptolemus comes to realize the wrong he has done and its consequences, he tries to retrace his steps and undo his own deed. What he discovers is that character once relinquished is not easily reclaimed. Life is no pawnshop. He is wounded, but the wound in this case is self-inflicted. The malaise he suffers is that of moral injury, which he self-diagnoses and describes in these timeless words: "All is disgust when

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one leaves his own nature and does things that misfit it” (902–3). We will return to these words in a moment, for they deserve close scrutiny and promise crucial insight. In the short space of the play, unfolding across a single day, we witness Neoptolemus the boy become Neoptolemus the veteran, who followed orders, did what needed to be done, bowed to what in the play is called a great, compelling necessity, and played his part in the Greek victory at Troy. At the same time, however, he leaves the audience and us with an unanswered and perhaps unanswerable question: “Is there no place, then, for repentance?” (1270).

We may question or at least wonder at the use of the word “repentance” here. Others take the Greek word in question to point to something more like “a change of mind.” Either way, what Neoptolemus wants is to be able to start over, to reverse himself, to take back what he did and to do something else instead. “Repentance” suggests remorse and an accompanying effort to “make up” or to compensate for a wrong done. But the Greek word here—*metagnōnai*—is closer to “make over” than to “make up.” Neoptolemus doesn’t want to accept that what is done is done. Rather than move on, he wants to move back. Inexperienced to the point of naiveté, he hasn’t yet fully accepted that time only flows in one direction. To realize fully what he is thinking and suffering we will need to go back now, as we said we would, and examine more closely his earlier lament: “All is disgust when one leaves his own nature and does things that misfit it.”

The key word and concept here is “nature” (*phusis*). By “his own nature” Neoptolemus could presumably mean “human nature,” his nature as a human being, or he could be referring to his own personal nature or character. In other words, when he did what he did and now regrets, Neoptolemus either forgot *what* he was or *who* he was or both. His action, in one or both senses, was “unnatural” to him and has brought with it a feeling of inner repulsion. This desperate complaint of inner repulsion and its root cause are nothing peculiar to Neoptolemus and his times. It is what we mean today by “moral injury,” which is to say that Neoptolemus is not alone in his pain. But how is it that we can violate our own nature? “Human nature” has come to mean whatever we find human beings doing; and who today would claim that individuals have natures of their own? In order to understand Neoptolemus’ pain (and our own) and not just feel it, we need to take a strategically brief excursion into Greek philosophy and, more specifically, into the “nature of nature” or the meaning of *phusis* as Sophocles likely understood it. This will be the first of many times we need to pause

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our central narrative in order to quarry a concept or idea that will prove essential to the historical and theological argument at the core of this book.

In the writings of Plato and Aristotle, the *phusis* or “nature” of anything referred to the full arc of its unfolding from seed to fruition, from birth to full being. It was a term that had to do with the “becoming” of anything across time, whether it be an art form like tragic drama, a tree like the oak, a disease like cholera, or an animal such as the elephant. Each has its own germinal beginning, its stages of development or growth, and its own proper fullness or end. Aristotle comments on how, in a world of becoming, a world like ours of motion and change, everything has its own *energeia*, its own inner being-at-work, its own direction and momentum. Fire, he says, rises when ignited, whereas stones, when released from the hand that holds them, fall. Acorns become oak trees, never elephants. All very obvious, all common sense, until we turn to human being. In the case of human being, he suggests, we need to picture an archer. He notches his arrow, draws his bow, aims, and releases the shaft to take its course. It’s all in the drawing of the bow, and of course the aim. They will determine the arrow’s arc, its direction and reach. The point here is that the archer possesses a full and heady freedom to choose the arrow’s path, just as human beings may and must choose their direction in life. What are the options to choose from? If we look around, we see them. They span, says Plato, the full expanse from heaven to hell, pointing out that some human beings are the gentlest, kindest creatures on the face of the earth, while others outdo the wildest animals in savagery and the most demented demons in their dark ways. The choice, he would say, is ours. Such is the burden and blessing of human freedom.

So is that it? Human nature is nothing but unfettered freedom of choice? Not according to Aristotle. We need to go back to the archer and notice that he has only one arrow, just as each of us has only one life. This is to say that our freedom is lost in the moment it is exercised. When the arrow leaves the bow it escapes the archer’s control, which only a moment before was total. But surely in the case of our lives, it doesn’t all happen so fast, in an instant. No, but it happens sooner than we would like. It happens in youth, according to Aristotle, as soon as we begin to act and make choices. He describes the process as a circle, in which action shapes character and character shapes action. In others words, we shape who we are by our actions and after a while we act more and more in accord with who we are. When we tell lies we become liars, and liars soon find that lies come

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more easily to them than the truth. The opposite is the case for those who commit themselves to telling the truth. After a while, after many turns of this wheel, habits are formed and our “character” takes full shape. Here again, in the word we have a telling image of the reality at hand. The Greek word *charakter* refers to an impression stamped into a coin or a seal cut or pressed into wood or wax. It is “fixed” once and for all, not readily altered or removed without injury or damage. Later in the history of thought, in late antiquity and the Middle Ages, this reality is referred to as “second nature,” which is not to be confused with first nature or human nature.

So what is “human nature” and where does it come in? According to Plato and Aristotle it is always there, from the beginning, as it were, an idea that could easily stop us in our tracks. Fortunately, all that we need to keep in mind at this point in our discussion is that human nature, as it was once and wisely understood, is not like the nature of anything else. It doesn’t account for the way people act or for the lives they live. Remember the archer and his freedom. Human nature doesn’t determine *what* we do, it only determines what we *ought* to do. It describes our moral limits or boundaries, which we are free to cross but not without consequences. It means our freedom is not without its limits. As soon as we begin to become aware of ourselves, our world, and our possibilities, we discover that we are able to do more and other than we ought to do. The appeal here to “limits” is not to any civic or social law, laid down by states or sovereigns, but rather to a law that we only come to know from within and then perhaps only when we transgress it, as Neoptolemus did. We experience it as disgust, contempt, and despair at having violated something at our core, either our human core or our personal core or quite probably both. “Native and indwelling in every soul is a cross-examiner . . . which is our accuser and our judge,”<sup>10</sup> asserts Philo, and we know this accuser by different names. Perhaps most often we see him or her in the mirror.

Make no mistake, the portrait of Neoptolemus that Sophocles preserved in *Philoctetes* is not the whole story of the infamous son of Achilles. It is a snapshot of a moment, suspended in time, when a kind and compassionate boy from the best of homes, answering his “nation’s” call and honoring the memory of his fallen father, came of age, went off to war, followed orders, did the necessary, lost his soul, and tried in vain to get it back. Others tell the rest of the story—how Neoptolemus (also known as “Pyrrhus”) played a decisive role in the Greek victory at Troy and at the same

10. Philo Judaeus, *Decalogue*, 87, cited in Konstan, *Before Forgiveness*.

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time disfigured his own and his family's legacy with sacrilege and atrocity. It was he who slew the aged Priam as he clung to the family altar, leaving his remains where they lay as food scraps for the household hounds. It was he too who tore the child Astyanax, son of Hector, from his mother's arms and hurled him from the city's walls. Later, he slit the throat of Astyanax's sister, Polyxena, over his own father's burial mound, supposedly because Achilles' ghost had cried out in thirst for her blood. After all of that we hear no more of his inner doubts or disgust. Instead, there are conflicting versions of his post-war feats and his eventual violent death, but not before he slept with, among others, Hector's widow and Helen's daughter, his seed in time making its way down to help fashion another boy-become-conqueror, named Alexander, who also never knew when to stop.

Neoptolemus is not just a famous face from the past. His story is not only a *Greek* tragedy. Even his name, *neo-p(t)olemus*, "new war," suggests that he may not be easy to consign to antiquity. Admittedly, he's an extreme case. The Greeks were fond of extremes, no matter how fervently they preached moderation.

When young veterans, like Neoptolemus or Noah Pierce, experience their first taste of war and its demands, what is it that they so often experience as having violated their nature, stolen their humanity, killed their souls, and made them criminals? What has been their crime? The simplest answer to this may have been given long ago by Amphitryon to his young son Herakles, fresh from battle, crazed and bent on death:

O child what is happening to you?  
Where have you left us and gone to?  
You're raving and possessed. Why? It must be the killing  
you've just done. You still have their blood on you . . . in you.<sup>11</sup>

There is no doubt regarding the criminality of killing in everyday life. The criminality of killing in war, on the other hand, is usually considered less problematic. War issues waivers to its participants, free passes, as it were, to take each other's lives with impunity; but it has never been that simple, as we shall see when we consider the history of this problem, the problem of legal or justified, much less celebrated, killing. Our Western Theories and Rules of Just War and Moral Murder, the ones we still invoke to silence our deepest misgivings over shedding blood, have from the

11. Euripides, *Herakles*, lines 963–64. For a full translation and discussion of Euripides' *Herakles*, see Meagher, *Herakles Gone Mad*.

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outset stood on soft soil. As we shall soon see, in the early centuries of the Common Era they emerged amidst fierce debate, and long after that, well into the medieval period, they had their earnest if ineffectual doubters and defectors. Oddly, that debate seems moot in our day. Granted, the legitimacy of this or that particular war may still be challenged, but the fact that war admits of legitimacy goes without saying. More than any other event in modern memory, World War II represents the capstone (or perhaps the gravestone) of the Just War Tradition. It makes the needed case and silences all but the most radical dissent. It proves, for nearly everyone, at least in Europe and the United States, that there is such a thing as a just war, a good war, a war that can be waged without scruples. In his highly touted book *The Unforgiving Minute: A Soldier's Education*,<sup>12</sup> West Point graduate and Rhodes Scholar Craig Mullaney relates how during his basic training, when he struggled to reconcile his moral code and religious upbringing with the fact that he was being trained to kill and to order others to do the same, he sought out his Catholic chaplain, who put his qualms to rest by asking, "Do you believe in a just war?" "I think so, Father," responded Mullaney, adding, "Like World War II?" "Believe" is the operative word here. One faith, it seems, may be used to trump another. The proof for the existence not of God but of just war is clearly the "Good War," the war against Hitler and Hirohito, the war against evil; and the accompanying assumption that needs no proof is that a war against evil cannot possibly be itself evil.

We are already ahead of ourselves at this point in our examination of just war, but it is important from the start to take note of one or two realities that are surprisingly often overlooked in the rush to war and in the rush, afterwards, to forget it. For one, we need to realize that war, as envisioned in just war theory—originally and for nearly two millennia—bore little or no resemblance to the wars that we have known in the last century. Before there was the "Good War" there was the "Great War," which ushered in what has rightfully been called the age of massacre. The scale and savagery of warfare as witnessed in the trenches of northern Europe from 1914 to 1918 shocked the world—420,000 British dead and another 60,000 killed on the first day of the Battle of the Somme. By the end of the war, the British had lost a generation, nearly 800,000 men, the majority of them upper-class, privileged, and finely educated. Meanwhile, the French lost a million men and the Germans closer to two million. The American dead numbered far fewer, just over 120,000, more than half of these from disease rather

12. Mullaney, *Unforgiving Minute*, 30–32.

## Introduction

than combat. Words did not and do not come easily to describe or comprehend such slaughter. All the same, as the savage harvest of World War I was underway, Sigmund Freud offered this less than prescient comment in his *Reflections on War and Death*:

When the fierce struggle of this war will have reached a decision every victorious warrior will joyfully and without delay return home to his wife and children, undisturbed by thoughts of the enemy he has killed either at close quarters or with weapons operating at a distance.<sup>13</sup>

What would assure so untroubled a homecoming for veterans of the Great War, as Freud saw it, was the happy fact that they, like all “civilized” men, had lost their “ethical delicacy of feeling.” Savage men, he explained, lived in fear of the men they murdered—of their lingering vengeful spirits, that is—whereas modern men knew better than to allow the past to haunt them. To their credit and to their agony, however, Freud underestimated the consciences of the men and women who returned from the trenches and the killing fields of the Great War and of every war since. What they saw and suffered and especially what they did in war came home with them and darkened the remainder of their days.

A generation later, following the horror of the Great War, the Good War proved immeasurably more horrific. The ranks of its countless dead dwarfed those of World War I. The age of massacre had gained momentum. What was new, however, was the indiscriminate massacre of civilians. Only a small fraction of the dead in the Good War, the deadliest conflict in history, had borne arms. They were mere kindling and fuel for the fire that fell on them, mostly from the sky. The traditional ratio of civilian to combatant deaths in war was turned on end, apparently for the indefinite future. President Obama acknowledged but understated this fact when, again in his Nobel speech, he pointed out that “in today’s wars, many more civilians are killed than soldiers.”<sup>14</sup> Setting aside questions of justice, it is questionable whether the wars of the last century as well as our own more recent conflicts can, without reservation, be called “war” at all. By definition, writes the eminent theorist and historian of war Martin Van Creveld,

war does not consist simply of a situation where one person or group puts the other to death . . . ; rather, it begins at that point

13. Freud, *Reflections on War and Death*, 20–21.

14. Obama, “Nobel.”



## Killing from the Inside Out

where inflicting mortal injury becomes reciprocal, an activity known as fighting. . . . In any war, the readiness to suffer and die, as well as to kill, represents the single most important factor.<sup>15</sup>

Killing without personal risk is something else and requires another name, assassination or execution, but that thought takes us where we are not yet prepared to go in this discussion. All we can say for now is that it is no wonder that those who witness such killing firsthand, whether they engage in it or not, are haunted to the end of their days by the memories of what they have seen.

In recent years we in the United States have found ourselves once again mired in war, two wars in fact, of longer duration than either of the world wars of the twentieth century. While it is all too easy for civilians to lose track of the passage of time, the loss of life, and the devastation of spirit and soul in our current conflicts, those who fight them for us cannot but keep a precise, inner tally of their cost. As we have already seen, the most invisible and silent cost is the one dismissed by Freud—the violated conscience—invisible because hidden, silent because silenced. Breaking that silence we again hear—this time from our veterans—the timeless voice of Neoptolemus, asking, “Is there no place, then, for repentance?”

In an age, like ours, of civilian massacre, knee-deep in blood, it is neither premature nor unreasonable to wonder if we have lost our way, as a nation and as a world. Do we any longer know what we are doing in sending our young men and women into all but unthinkable situations to do what we would never do and would rather not know about, except as it is eventually packaged for general consumption, as news or entertainment? This much we do know—that wars are not over when they’re over. They leave behind wreckage and wounds. Warriors bring their war home with them, not like a tan acquired on holiday but like a secret they wish they hadn’t been told.

What about that secret? After the wars of the twentieth century—especially those wars labeled “great” and “good”—the common wisdom passed on to veterans from every side regarding what they knew and others could not know was clichéd: “let it go,” “leave it alone and it will leave you alone,” “leave it behind and it will stay there; just move on.” All this made—and makes—perfect sense, except to veterans. “Alone” . . . “behind” . . . how convenient! To the uninitiated: common sense. To the warrior come home: silent betrayal.

15. Van Creveld, *Transformation*, 160.

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Why betrayal? What's wrong with forgetting what we wish we had never learned? Why not "sweet oblivion"? Re-enter the ancients, because they have something to say that perhaps we have not heard yet or thought about lately.

Curiously, the word for "the past" in ancient Greek means that which we face, and the word for "the future" means that which is behind our back. What sense, we ask, does that make? Don't we walk into the future with our back to the past? In that case, however, as the Greeks see it, we are walking blind. Yes, of course, our eyes face forward—time's inevitable direction and ours as well. But, as we do so, as we move through the time of our lives, it's the past that we can see and the future to which we are blind. As Homer describes it, the future and, inevitably, death stalk us from behind, our blind side. We cannot see death coming, but we know it is. The fact is that when we leave our past behind—forgetting it or banishing it—like Oedipus, we pluck out our own eyes and start over, not knowing who we are or what we are doing. Such oblivion is never truly sweet, only foolish. What I propose, then, in this book is to shed light on the present and to provide some guidance for the future by walking into the past. The walk I propose, however, is no idle ramble, but rather a strategic tracing of the roots and branches of our Western understanding of war and, more pointedly, of just war and moral injury. The past, after all, is what we can know and is at the same time what we cannot afford not to know.