# Moral Injury and Revisionist Just War Theory

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World War I represents one of the first modern occasions that militaries systematically addressed the link between combat and its psychological effects on combatants. The term "shell shock" appeared in 1915 because of attempts by military psychologists to uncover the etiology of trauma symptoms related to war.[1] In contemporary terminology, this combat-related trauma is often described as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a trauma- and stressor-related psychological disorder. Diagnostic criteria for PTSD include a history of exposure to certain types of traumatic events, including death, serious injury, and sexual assault, which must cause "clinically significant distress or impairment in the individual's social interactions, capacity to work or other important areas of functioning," and not be "the physiological result of another medical condition, medication, drugs or alcohol."[2]

But PTSD only captures one possible response to trauma. In the past few decades, researchers have begun exploring a related yet distinct response to trauma called moral injury. Although there is no single definition, "moral injury" can be described as a psychological injury that occurs when an individual experiences an event or series of events that cuts against her deeply held spiritual or ethical beliefs.[3] While moral injury is closely related to and can coexist with PTSD, it does not have PTSD's diagnostic emphasis on fear and the lingering fight-or-flight instincts that persist when one has directly experienced or witnessed traumatic events. Moral injury instead encompasses a different and distinct kind of trauma,

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where an individual can possess such feelings as guilt, shame, and regret, but need not feel the same kind of stress and fright commonly associated with PTSD. Just as PTSD can occur in both civilians and soldiers, so too can moral injury.

The early research on moral injury largely occurred in the field of clinical psychology, specifically by researchers who explored its relationship to combat. Philosophers later explored moral injury in wider terms. The stock-in-trade of philosophy is making distinctions and conceptual clarifications, the application of which to moral injury would aid in building a comprehensive theory of the subject. In the first half of this essay, I will show how these clarifications could help inform clinical research and practice, particularly when it comes to members of the military. I will then argue that a greater philosophical analysis of moral injury can help illuminate the normative implications of acknowledging moral injury in debates within just war theory over traditionalist and revisionist interpretations.[4]

Moreover, the relationship between moral injury and *jus ad bellum's* just cause criterion is indeterminate. Particularly underexplored are the conceptual and empirical implications of the possibility that wars lacking a just cause may result in numerically larger cases of moral injury and/or more severe instances of it. This is a possibility that should be of interest to psychology and philosophy alike. In the rest of the essay, I discuss further avenues of potential research based on some conceptual distinctions that may aid researchers in pinpointing certain key questions.

## The Just War Tradition

Much of the contemporary scholarship in the just war tradition has focused on a debate between traditionalist and revisionist accounts of just war. This debate centers on determining which agents can ethically participate in war and under what conditions. According to traditionalist accounts, the morality of when a war can be waged (*jus ad bellum*) is independent from the morality of how a war can be fought (*jus in bello*). Combatants are permitted to fight for an unjust cause insofar as they abide by in bello principles such as proportionality and discrimination. Traditionalist accounts maintain that it is not the responsibility of combatants to make evaluative normative judgments about the wars in which they fight in order for it to be morally permissible for them to engage in combat. Nor does the justice of their cause have a material bearing on their ethical permissibility to fight; they must fight well, but they need not fight for the good.



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While traditionalist accounts treat the moral rules of war as sui generis, revisionist accounts reject the claim that war is morally exceptional. In the terminology of the literature, revisionists often subscribe to "reductive individualism." They are revisionist in the sense that they claim to be revising many of the tenets of traditionalist accounts of just war theory.[5] They are reductive in the sense that they argue that the moral rules governing war are those that govern individuals in ordinary peacetime life. And they are individualists in the sense that they believe individuals, not collectives, are the proper unit of ethical analysis. In combination, these differences between revisionist and traditionalist accounts lead to significant disagreement on who can be justifiably harmed or killed in war and why.

Ethical acts in war can be further distinguished with respect to whether their justification is fact-relative or evidence-relative.[6] A fact-relative account maintains that the justness of an action depends on its objective truth. As Helen Frowe notes, "It does not matter whether the combatant (or the political leader) knows these truths. If her action is fact-relative unjustified, she will act wrongly in performing it. What she believes or has evidence of might furnish her with an excuse, but it won't provide her with a justification for acting."[7] The justification for an act is evidence-relative when the available evidence gives an individual reason to believe and then act as if those beliefs are true, even if the evidence leads an agent to make a fact-relative moral mistake.

## Moral Injury

Similar distinctions can be found in the literature on moral injury albeit with different terminology. For example, philosopher Nancy Sherman defines "moral injury" as "experiences of serious inner conflict arising from what one takes to be grievous moral transgressions that can overwhelm one's sense of goodness or humanity." She goes on to say, "The sense of transgression can arise from (real or *apparent*) transgressive commissions or omissions perpetrated by oneself or others."[8] In this account, the precipitant of injury is evidence relative; there is no condition under which the transgressions are objectively true—that is, fact relative. Jonathan Shay, a psychologist and pioneer in research on war fighters and moral injury, defines moral injury as "a betrayal of what's right by someone who holds legitimate authority (e.g., in the military—a leader); in a high stakes situation."[9] In contrast to Sherman, Shay posits that moral injury results from a violation of what *is* right (fact relative), not what one *believes* to be right (evidence relative).



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This epistemic distinction in just war captures the way in which moral injuries can occur in situations described as evidence relative, such as when the available evidence gives an individual reason to believe a transgression has occurred, even when making a fact-relative moral mistake. For example, a soldier may kill an individual in combat and later watch camera footage from a particular angle that seemingly indicates the person was a noncombatant, even though additional aerial footage unavailable to the soldier proves that the individual killed was in fact a combatant. Given the available evidence, it is intuitively plausible that the soldier could believe that she killed a noncombatant, and such belief could lead to moral injury. Understanding the different situations in which individuals may develop moral trauma can have a practical bearing on an individual's medical diagnoses, treatment, and health outcomes. Disagreements over whether individuals can be said to develop moral injury in one circumstance but not in another may lead to different treatments: in one instance they may be treated for moral injury, and in another for trauma that is separable from the diagnostic criteria of moral injury.

Whereas writers on the subject, such as Sherman and Shay, diverge on the role that fact-relative and evidence-relative acts or omissions play in moral injury, they converge on the idea that first-person moral injury can result from the actions of a second party. Again, this conceptualization is intuitively plausible. Suppose that a female officer witnesses sexual harassment being perpetrated by someone in her unit against another female officer. Further imagine that the female officer who has witnessed the harassment reports the case to her superior, who in turn does nothing. It is a reasonable expectation of the reporting female officer that her superior would properly address the reported sexual harassment. If the superior fails to do so, that person has violated the trust of the female officer to do the right thing. It is conceivable that such a violation—a transgression committed by a second party but impacting the first party—could result in moral injury.[10] Craig Bryan and colleagues have suggested that "differentiating between the agent of perceived transgressions (that is, self vs. other) may also hold important conceptual and empirical value."[11] It would be beneficial for empirical researchers to further explore this conceptual distinction since empirical studies on PTSD already suggest a "separate phenomenology and pathway to PTSD" between perpetration and betrayal-based events in combat veterans.[12]

These conflicting concepts of moral injury, combined with early empirical findings, raise important normative and epistemic questions that call for greater clarity



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as well as empirical data on the concept of moral injury. Some further questions to explore include: What counts as a transgression? Who transgresses and causes injury? How do individuals' beliefs function in determining moral injury (that is, is it fact relative or evidence relative)? Is there a meaningful conceptual and empirical distinction between self-perpetrated transgressions and the betrayals perpetrated by others? Answers to these questions could help develop a broader theory of moral injury. Such clarification would not be merely "academic"; the bases upon which one defines moral injury could very well also inform clinical diagnoses, treatment, and veteran health insurance coverage. We have witnessed similar implications for the formulation of diagnostic criteria for PTSD.

## Moral Injury and Revisionist Just War Theory

If philosophical moral injury could contribute to clinical psychology, how might it inform just war theory? Here we return to a core area of fundamental disagreement between the traditionalist and revisionist accounts—whether, all things equal, fighting for an unjust cause is morally wrong. One need not be a revisionist to accept that killing in war can lead to moral injury, at least insofar as one accepts the possibility that killing may transgress a deeply held moral belief even when done justifiably. But if killing by combatants who fight on the unjust side of a war is fact-relative unjustified, such an argument logically entails that wars contain larger amounts of unjustifiable killing when compared to traditionalist accounts. If killing unjustifiably has a positive correlation with moral injury, then there is a possibility that fighting for an unjust cause may lead to numerically more cases of moral injury, and this may provide an additional consideration for just war criteria.

Suppose Combatant A returns from fighting in a war in which her side's cause is unjust, she knows her side's cause is unjust, and she has killed opposing enemy forces who were justifiably resisting her. She is presented with two accounts of justified killing in war—a traditionalist account and a revisionist account. Under the former account, the killing she engaged in was not morally wrong; under the latter, it was. The two accounts will lead Combatant A to different ethical judgments about her own conduct, and such conclusions may lead her to believe she perpetrated moral transgressions, which could then result in moral injury. However, it is unknown how the account of justified killing in war to which one subscribes impacts the pathway, onset, or severity of moral injury. This is an area that

empirical study could shed light on. Such empirical findings could inform considerations in just war theory, particularly if we care about and want to account for the psychological and moral costs that engaging in warfare can have on its participants.

In addition to it being unclear how killing unjustifiably may impact moral injury in combatants, so too is the effect of being betrayed by political leadership. Suppose that Combatant A accepts a revisionist account of killing in war. She remains in the military and is ordered to a second combat deployment in a different war. She believes that the cause for this war is just and that she is engaging in a fact-relative justified killing of opposing enemy forces. Now further suppose the leader of Combatant A's country falsely and intentionally claims the just cause as a pretext, but evidence later makes clear to Combatant A that the cause was unjust.

What is the response of Combatant A? She could feel betrayed. She had the reasonable expectation that she could trust her political leadership to not intentionally lie about such grave matters, and her trust was violated. If moral injury can result from transgressions committed by a second party, this betrayal may be a morally injurious event regardless of whether one adopts a traditionalist or revisionist account of killing in war. Recall that most traditionalist accounts argue that the moral responsibility of just cause lies with the political leadership. Consequently, an everyday soldier might accept the moral exceptionalism of war—that is, believing that she does no wrong when fighting an unjustified war—*and* still believe her political leadership betrayed her. While a traditionalist account may accept that moral injury can occur through such a betrayal, it rejects that a fact-relative wrong was committed through the combatant's killing; traditionalist conceptions maintain that a soldier does no wrong when fighting and killing even without a just cause. But in keeping with a revisionist account, the breach of trust would also have led to fact-relative unjustified killing by Combatant A. Under this view, Combatant A is betrayed twice—first because of the breach of trust and second because the betrayal led to fact-relative unjustified killing.

Whether betrayals lead to moral injury is a question that could be explored by, for instance, looking at the effect of the weapons of mass destruction pretext used to justify the invasion of Iraq by the United States. More broadly, empirical findings could clarify the relationship between betrayal, just cause, moral injury, and accounts of just war. The possibility that fighting for an unjust cause may impact



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moral injury, both as a result of killing unjustifiably and as a result of being betrayed by an individual in a position of leadership, should be of particular interest to scholars focusing on revisionist just war theory. It should also be a concern to supporters of the traditionalist view, since the deference granted to leadership in determining whether to go to war may be a previously unacknowledged source for moral injury.

## Conclusion

This essay has briefly addressed some of the areas of interest in which moral injury and the just war tradition overlap. It concludes with two broad observations. The first is that it agrees that "research on transgressive acts and moral injury is complicated by the lack of conceptual clarity regarding definitions, causes, mechanisms, and outcomes."[13] What is needed to achieve greater conceptual clarity is multidisciplinary research that includes the humanities, social sciences, and medicine. There are two immediate and low-hanging fruitful avenues of inquiry for future research on moral injury that rest at the axes of philosophy and psychology. The first is conceptual: revisionist accounts of just war should more fully consider the connection between just cause and moral injury, or revisionism and moral injury more generally. The second is empirical: the relationship between combat veterans' beliefs of ad bellum just cause and moral injury should be studied. In the language and context of this essay, if a soldier believes she fights for an unjust cause, how does this impact the pathway, susceptibility, onset, and severity of moral injury? Does the distinction between fact-relative and evidence-relative justifications for killing in war impact moral injury?

The second observation involves a concern about conceptual creep.[14] The consideration here is that the concept of moral injury could become expansive to the point of being almost meaningless because of an ever increasing list of what constitutes a potentially morally injurious event. In addition, if moral injury can result from the conduct of multiple agents, both the individual and a second party (for example, a political leader), then this may also widen the net of those subject to moral injury. Perhaps the deployed cook or the undeployed logistics officer may not believe that they have taken part in an individual transgression, but they may still feel betrayed by a commander in chief. Perhaps even civilians whose democratically elected leaders authorize war may be affected. In the end, it may happen that everyone suffers from moral injury. Perhaps this is true; perhaps it

is simply a fact that life *is* morally injurious, albeit some lives suffer more and worse injuries than others.

NOTES

[1] Charles S. Myers, "A Contribution to the Study of Shell Shock: Being an Account of Three Cases of Loss of Memory, Vision, Smell, and Taste, Admitted into the Duchess of Westminster's War Hospital, le Touquet," *Lancet* 185, no. 4772 (February 1915), pp. 316–20.

[2] American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association, 2013), p. 272.

[3] For varying definitions of moral injury, see Shira Maguen and Brett Litz, "Moral Injury in Veterans of War," *PTSD Research Quarterly* 23, no. 1 (2012), pp. 1–6; Brett T. Litz, Nathan Stein, Eileen Delaney, Leslie Lebowitz, William P. Nash, Caroline Silva, and Shira Maguen, "Moral Injury and Moral Repair in War Veterans: A Preliminary Model and Intervention Strategy," *Clinical Psychology Review* 29 (2009), pp. 695–706; and Sheila Frankfurt and Patricia Frazier, "A Review of Research on Moral Injury in Combat Veterans," *Military Psychology* 28, no. 5 (2016), pp. 318–30.

[4] I concede that there are fundamental internal disagreements between those who consider themselves revisionist and those who consider themselves traditional just war theorists. In providing a simplified overview, I do not mean to suggest that there is a single traditional or single revisionist position, just as there is not a single just war theory. For a thorough overview of these positions, see Seth Lazar, "Just War Theory: Revisionists versus Traditionalists," *Annual Review of Political Science* 20 (May 2017), pp. 37–54.

[5] I say that revisionists "claim to be revising" traditionalist just war theory because there is historical precedent for the revisionist position in traditionalist just war theory. See Gregory Reichberg, "Just War and Regular War: Competing Paradigms," in David Rodin and Henry Shue, eds., *Just and Unjust Warriors: The Moral and Legal Status of Soldiers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). Although I agree that revisionism may not be all that revisionist, because "revisionism" is the terminology that has been adopted, I use the term.

[6] See Derek Parfit, *On What Matters*, vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 143. Parfit makes three distinctions of types of justifications: They can be fact relative, evidence relative, or belief relative. For the purposes of this essay, I omit discussion of belief-relative accounts. See also Frank Jackson, "Decision-Theoretic Consequentialism and the Nearest and Dearest Objection," *Ethics* 101, no. 3 (April 1991), pp. 461–82.

[7] Helen Frowe, "The Just War Framework," in Seth Lazar and Helen Frowe, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Ethics of War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 41–58, at p. 50.

[8] Nancy Sherman, *Afterwar: Healing the Moral Wounds of Our Soldiers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 8 (emphasis added).

[9] See Jonathan Shay, "Moral Injury," *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 31, no. 2 (2014), pp. 182–91, at p. 183.

[10] Shay notes that other researchers often emphasize transgressions resulting from an agent's own actions and do not focus on the transgressions perpetrated by third-party power holders. See ibid. For a discussion of betrayal and trauma, see Jennifer J. Freyd, Anne P. DePrince, and David H. Gleaves, "The State of Betrayal Trauma Theory: Reply to McNally—Conceptual Issues and Future Directions," *Memory* 15, no. 3 (2007), pp. 295–311.

[11] Craig J. Bryan, AnnaBelle O. Bryan, Michael D. Anestis, Joye C. Anestis, Bradley A. Green, Neysa Etienne, Chad E. Morrow, and Bobbie Ray-Sannerud, "Measuring Moral Injury: Psychometric Properties of the Moral Injury Events Scale in Two Military Samples," *Assessment* 23, no. 5 (October 2016), pp. 557–70.

[12] Alexander H. Jordan, Ethan Eisen, Elisa Bolton, William P. Nash, and Brett T. Litz, "Distinguishing War-Related PTSD Resulting from Perpetration- and Betrayal-Based Morally Injurious Events," *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy* 9, no. 6 (2017), pp. 627–32, at p. 628. See also William P. Nash, Alyssa M. Boasso, Maria Steenkamp, Jonathan L. Larson, Rebecca E. Lubin, and Brett Litz, "Posttraumatic Stress in Deployed Marines: Prospective Trajectories of Early Adaptation," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 124, no. 1 (2014), pp. 155–71; and Kent D. Drescher, David W. Foy, Caroline Kelly, Anna Leshner, Kerrie Schutz, and Brett Litz, "An Exploration of the Viability and Usefulness of the Construct of Moral Injury in War Veterans," *Traumatology* 17, no. 1 (March 2011), pp. 8–13.

[13] Frankfurt and Frazier, "A Review of Research on Moral Injury in Combat Veterans," pp. 318–330.

[14] Similar concerns have been raised about diagnostic bracket creep in the expanding list of what constitutes a traumatic event in the criteria for PTSD. See Robert L. Spitzer, Michael B. First, and Jerome

C. Wakefield, "Saving PTSD from Itself in DSM-V," *Journal of Anxiety Disorders* 21, no. 2 (2007), pp. 233–41.

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Abstract: As part of the roundtable, "Moral Injury, Trauma, and War," this essay explores the relationship between revisionist just war theory and moral injury. It proceeds in four sections. First, it offers a brief overview of the just war tradition, focusing on traditionalist and revisionist accounts, respectively. Next, it explores the relationship between moral injury and armed conflict. Then, it explores the links between moral injury and revisionist accounts of just war theory. Finally, by way of conclusion, the essay signals two potential complementary paths forward that future research could use to clarify the revisionist position and its link with moral injury.

Keywords: moral injury, just war theory, peace and security, ethics, moral theory