

Moral injury and the gap between the soldier and the state's moral identity

I'M HOME ALIVE, well not really.

After War - HC Palmer¹

Dr Deane-Peter Baker in his upcoming book *Morality and Ethics at War* claims that a significant cause of ethical failure and moral injury is the 'gap' between the 'deep and wide' moral identity of the individual soldier/sailor/airman, on the one hand, and the ethics of war based on the thin and narrow morality of the state, on the other. With the advent of the modern moral identity, the liberal democratic state has seen a divide arise between the morality of the state and the individual moral identity of its citizens. This has been particularly relevant with the increasing diversification of previously homogenous societies, when state and individual morality was more aligned. Although this has impacts on the everyday lives of citizens, when soldiers, sailors and airmen² are asked to apply violence by the state, gaps between individual and state morality can be particularly impacting. Due to the breadth of this topic this essay will focus only on moral injury in this context. The essay will outline this gap by defining the place of state morality in liberal democracies, the modern individual moral identity, and moral injury. The essay will then show how the gap can lead to moral injury, by contrasting state motivations for engaging in recent conflicts with individual motivations for involvement. Finally, the essay will seek to provide recommendations for how

¹ HC Palmer, "After War," Narrative (2016).

² From hereon in soldiers, sailors and airmen will be referred to collectively as soldiers

a modern military, in particular the Australian Defence Force, can better prepare its personnel for moral injury, by bridging the gap between state and individual morality.

Liberal democracy and state morality

In order to accommodate increasing diversity and multiculturalism, liberal democratic society has two choices, to judge what is the good and act to impose it, or to interfere as little as possible and allow its citizens to choose. The second option is the idea of moral neutrality, which political philosophers have argued is the best means of allowing maximum space for the flourishing of the vast array of differing 'broad, deep' moral identities of their citizens. The liberal democratic state should have no say on the good life because as Gaus summarises, 'liberal politics, on this view, cannot be reasonably grounded on pursuit of what is truly valuable, for value is a matter of taste, and our tastes differ.'³ Implementing moral neutrality in practice, is difficult, consequences can differ from intent, and paradoxically, although moral neutrality should be the ideal, there are some areas of a state which cannot be neutral. such as language.⁴ Therefore, true moral neutrality is more asymptotic; we are always striving to approach it, just as 'no contemporary state is democratic according to any of the various notions of ideal democratic theory.'⁵ Peter Balint proposes a solution; what he calls difference sensitive neutrality. He argues that moral neutrality can be implemented 'as neutral as possible between ways of life.'⁶ This allows for the inevitable areas where a state cannot help but be non-neutral; 'choices [are] implemented to just the level required to achieve its goal, and no more,'⁷ in a manner akin to the minimum use of force. Balint's solution is difference

³ Gerald F. Gaus, "Liberalism at the end of the century," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 5, no. 2 (2000): 190.

⁴ Peter Balint, "Identity claims: why liberal neutrality is the solution, not the problem," *Political Studies* 63, no. 2 (2015): 497.

⁵ Balint, "Identity claims: why liberal neutrality is the solution, not the problem," 497.

⁶ Balint, "Identity claims: why liberal neutrality is the solution, not the problem," 501.

⁷ Balint, "Identity claims: why liberal neutrality is the solution, not the problem," 501.

sensitive and is a continual process. As society changes, rather than adding more restrictions, Balint argues for removing restrictions instead. He bases this on an understanding that the state does not always have the most intimate knowledge of the personal lives or intricate moral identities of its citizens.

Individual moral identity

Unlike state morality which should be neutral in a liberal democracy, individual moral identity is akin to a vast tapestry and can differ hugely from person to person. Each person has a moral identity, or horizons, self shaped, and in turn shaped by their environment. In other words; ‘humans devise or accept or have thrust upon them descriptions of themselves, and these descriptions help to make them what they are.’⁸ It is these horizons that ‘provides the frame within which they can determine where they stand on questions of what is good, or worthwhile, or admirable, or of value.’⁹ It is the answers to these questions that Charles Taylor refers to as ‘goods;’ whether people ‘believe in rational mastery, or a rich concept of family life, or expressive fulfilment, or fame,’¹⁰ Within a society like Australia, people may share similar goods; but even shared goods can take different priorities from one person to the next. Individuals orientate their lives morally within these horizons, with goods as guiding landmarks, all influenced and shaped by the backdrop of their ‘socio-economic background, parenting, schooling and the stability of their upbringing.’¹¹

⁸ Charles Taylor, "The dialogical self," *Rethinking knowledge: Reflections across the disciplines* (1995): 58.

⁹ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the self: The making of the modern identity* (Harvard University Press, 1989), 27.

¹⁰ Taylor, *Sources of the self: The making of the modern identity*, 62.

¹¹ Thomas McDermott in Thomas R. Frame and Albert Palazzo, *Ethics Under Fire: Challenges for the Australian Army* (NewSouth Publishing, 2017), 37.

Unique factors affecting service personnel

Before defining moral injury, it is worth noting the unique characteristics of personnel who join the military, which potentially make them outliers to the broadly present modern individual moral identity. A 2014 Pew Research Centre study describes American millennials - those born between 1982 and 1996 - a key demographic for military recruiting, and those who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan since the early 2000s, as 'relatively unattached to organised politics and religion'¹² demonstrating 'at or near the highest levels of political and religious disaffiliation recorded.'¹³ Millennials are 'more unmoored from and distrustful and distrustful of institutions' and they also demonstrated low social trust.'

By contrast, people who decide to join the military generally buck these trends, simply by signing on the dotted line, they demonstrate and place a trust in a traditional institution, albeit one which has maintained its place of trust in society. Furthermore, this is an immense trust. It invariably implies that they consent to and are willing to lose their lives in its service, and although they come from the background of a liberal democratic society which values their individual rights, they are willing to waive these rights in joining the military.

The military is not a liberal democratic institution; although it represents the state, its nature requires a difference. This manifests as a more conservative system, one which impinges on the individual rights of its personnel; 'the military in general remains focused on a functional imperative that prizes success in war above all else...it implies a set of behaviors and values markedly different from those predominant in civil society.'¹⁴ What this means is that service personnel are unlikely to fit the general profile of their civilian contemporaries

¹² Paul Taylor et al., "Millennials in adulthood," Washington, DC: Pew Research Center <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/03/07/millennials-inadulthood> (2014): 4.

¹³ Taylor et al., "Millennials in adulthood," 4.

¹⁴ Richard D. Hooker Jr, *Soldiers of the state: Reconsidering American civil-military relations*, ARMY WAR COLL CARLISLE BARRACKS PA (2004), 5-6.

both at initial enlistment, and may be further affirmed as training and in-group affiliation progresses. Although their values and social attitudes are likely to be similar, for instance ‘on fundamental questions...there are no sharp disagreements with the larger society...there is general agreement about what constitutes right and wrong behavior,’¹⁵ key differences arise in how these behaviours are enforced.

If we accept that individual moral identity is dialogical, shaping and being shaped by its environment, then members of the military will be influenced by these changes. ‘The military as an institution views violations of publicly accepted standards of behavior more seriously because they threaten the unity, cohesion, or survival of the group,’¹⁶ and arguably this applies to service personnel who accept and live with these means of enforcing behaviour. This becomes particularly important as it applies to the gap between state and individual morality and the causes of long term moral injury and alienation of the military from society.

Moral injury

The existence of moral injury alongside traditionally recognised mental health conditions such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is receiving increasing attention. While methods of treatment and definitions of moral injury are still being developed as the body of literature grows, a team of psychologists stated that moral injury ‘involves an act of transgression that creates dissonance and conflict because it violates assumptions and beliefs about right and wrong and personal goodness.’¹⁷ Jonathan Shay later expanded on this definition to include other people as the perpetrator of acts; ‘[1] betrayal of what’s right, [2]

¹⁵ Hooker Jr, *Soldiers of the state: Reconsidering American civil-military relations*, 7.

¹⁶ Hooker Jr, *Soldiers of the state: Reconsidering American civil-military relations*, 7.

¹⁷ Brett T. Litz et al., "Moral injury and moral repair in war veterans: A preliminary model and intervention strategy," *Clinical Psychology Review* 29, no. 8 (2009/12/01/ 2009): 698, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2009.07.003>, <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0272735809000920>.

by someone who holds legitimate authority, [3] in a high stakes situation.¹⁸ Shay refers to someone who holds legitimate authority as a leader, however, the authority to kill for instance is held at the lowest level in the military - every soldier is empowered under rules of engagement and the laws of armed conflict. Although some of the symptoms of moral injury align with PTSD; people are afflicted by re experiencing events and seek numbing or avoidance,¹⁹ it is distinct. Fatima Measham has succinctly summarised these differences; moral injury 'arises from different factors: witnessing, learning about, failing to prevent, or perpetrating acts that transgress deeply embedded moral values. It constitutes a betrayal of personal beliefs, inducing feelings of guilt and shame, as well as loss of trust and withdrawal.'²⁰

Why the state goes to war

There are limited reasons why a state would legally go to war, generally speaking they are thin and narrow, reflecting the moral neutrality of the state. Now more and more, the conflicts Australia has been involved in have seen a mismatch between the national interest and the personal interest. For most Australians, the reason to serve in World War One and World War Two was relatively simple; national survival. Only 13 years after federation, a majority of Australians still identified with the United Kingdom in the case of WWI and in the case of WWII, Australia was under literal threat of invasion in the Pacific theatre. Additionally, individual values and the values of the Australian state were fairly well aligned and homogenous; at the turn of the century 95.2% of the population was born in Australia,

¹⁸ Jonathan Shay, "Moral injury," *Intertexts* 16, no. 1 (2012): 59.

¹⁹ Shay, "Moral injury," 58.

²⁰ Fatima Measham, "Moral injury and the recalibration of priorities," *Eureka Street* 25, no. 18 (2015).

the United Kingdom or Ireland,²¹ whereas the most recent data from 2010, indicated 6% of the population were born in China, and another 6% were born in India.²²

Australia's involvement in its most recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have been driven by the national interest; namely the maintenance of our international alliances, rather than national survival. In support of a morally neutral liberal democratic society, reasons for going to war should reflect the neutral morality of the state. Throughout Australia's almost two decade long involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, narratives surrounding why Australia is involved have been inconsistent, whether from waging war on terror to supporting our alliance partners communicated from the highest levels of government. This inconsistency has been amplified across the levels of command, from the strategic; whole of government to the operational and tactical; by taskforce commanders, opening the door for immediate and lasting moral injury.

Why I go to war

By contrast to the state, individual motivations can range from aligning with the national interest; either Australia's support to its alliances or waging the war on terror, to more altruistic and personal ones; helping Afghanistan or Iraq, bringing democracy or freedom, or rebuilding, or even something as simple as serving alongside one's fellow soldiers. For individuals, as their experiences in war shape them further, these motivations may shift.

When a soldier goes to war they transpose their own values and motivations onto the state, believing that the state's values align. The subsequent realisation of misalignment can have a devastating moral effect. When there has been significant risk to, or more importantly toll on life and limb, it becomes harder for soldiers to be able to justify their parts in a conflict

²¹ Graeme Hugo, "A century of population change in Australia," World 1990 (2000).

²² ABS, "Year Book Australia," (Australian Bureau of Statistics Canberra, 2012).

they don't agree with. For example, a soldier may deploy to Afghanistan or Iraq, believing that the ADF has deployed them there to help free the Afghan or Iraqi people, this reason amplified by the messages communicated by the commander of their taskforce. As their deployment continues, the cultural complexities of conflict set in, debunking their beliefs. This in turn leads to the realisation that Australian efforts are not actually helping, the people of Afghanistan or Iraq do not want Australia's assistance, or worse yet, actually support efforts to oust Australian forces, viewing them as foreign invaders. Realisations like this are likely to lead to a betrayal of their personal beliefs. Compounding this, if they then realise that the ADF's motivations were never in line with their own, the betrayal of personal beliefs can extend to a loss of trust in an organisation that they have invested significant trust in.

One such example is the backlash against policies of non-intervention in cases of child sex abuse in Afghanistan by American service personnel. U.S. policy was that their forces working alongside Afghan security forces were not to intervene, 'not even when their Afghan allies have abused boys on military bases.'²³ This quote from Captain Daniel Quinn, is particularly telling. It outlines both individual motivation for going to Afghanistan; 'the reason we were here is because we heard the terrible things the Taliban were doing to people, how they were taking away human rights'²⁴ and the outcomes of the U.S. involvement; 'but we were putting people into power who would do things that were worse than the Taliban did.'²⁵ Eventually both Captain Quinn and Sergeant Charles Martland intervened, unable to cope with inaction any longer. Sergeant Martland was quoted saying; 'we felt that morally we could no longer stand by and allow our A.L.P. to commit atrocities.'²⁶ Interestingly, comments by

²³ Joseph Goldstein, "US soldiers told to ignore sexual abuse of boys by Afghan allies," New York Times 20 (2015).

²⁴ Goldstein, "US soldiers told to ignore sexual abuse of boys by Afghan allies."

²⁵ Captain Daniel Quinn, Goldstein, "US soldiers told to ignore sexual abuse of boys by Afghan allies."

²⁶ Sergeant Charles Martland, Goldstein, "US soldiers told to ignore sexual abuse of boys by Afghan allies."

another soldier who did not intervene highlight the spectrum of moral values among soldiers within the military. Other soldiers agreed with the U.S. policy 'intended to maintain good relations with the Afghan police and militia units,'²⁷ citing a strategic picture and trusting Afghanistan law in that 'the bigger picture was fighting the Taliban...it wasn't to stop molestation.'²⁸ The contrast of responses between people in a relatively small organisation highlights the number of areas where trust can be lost or personal beliefs betrayed.

Situations encountered in contemporary conflict are likely to contain opportunities for loss of trust or betrayal of beliefs at multiple levels, the more complex the situation the more potential for moral injury. As we've seen from the above case of child sex abuse in Afghanistan, Captain Quinn and Sergeant Martland saw their personal beliefs and values starkly contrasted against those of the Afghan men they were working with. They potentially lost trust in their U.S. colleagues who were unwilling to intervene with them, and lost trust in their chains of command and the U.S. government. Ultimately, they both acted to regain trust in themselves or repair the betrayal of their personal beliefs.

While moral injury can occur immediately as events occur, the ammunition for moral wounds can lie dormant for years, awakening in retrospect, on reflection or as a response to external voices. One particular catalyst for long term moral injury can arise because of the nexus of the liberal democratic state, and individual moral identity shaped by service in the military. A strength of the liberal democratic state, is that it can 'accommodate diverse and conflicting values or preferences...accommodate those whose values clash.'²⁹ Although the state should be morally neutral, society's values are just as, if not more diverse than those of the soldiers who serve them. Citizen's values are just as likely as soldier's values to conflict

²⁷ Goldstein, "US soldiers told to ignore sexual abuse of boys by Afghan allies."

²⁸ Anonymous Lance Corporal, Goldstein, "US soldiers told to ignore sexual abuse of boys by Afghan allies."

²⁹ Gaus, "Liberalism at the end of the century," 192.

with the reasons Australia goes to war, often resulting in legitimate criticism, even from members of the government, opposing political parties, or military members. This criticism in the public arena has the risk of further highlighting the gap between individual soldiers' motivations and those of the state, and society, leading to moral injury, through a loss of trust in the state and one's fellow citizens.

A loss of trust in one's fellow citizens can be a particularly harrowing moral injury for veterans who have left military service as it serves to alienate them from a society they are trying to incorporate into. Moral injury is inexplicably linked to shame; it 'involves global evaluations of the self,'³⁰ eg the personal beliefs or trust - both essential elements of moral injury. Further compounding this problem, shame, as opposed to guilt, which is usually associated with more positive outcomes ie the 'making of amends,'³¹ 'is likely to lead to extensive withdrawal, which in turn exacerbates shame.'³² When combined with a loss of trust in society, this alienation has a multiplying effect, leading to increasingly spiralling isolation. Veterans in this situation may seek alternative support networks or spaces, which may or may not be positive.

Recommendations

The recommendations of this essay are below. Perhaps more fitting to the author of this essay, whose experience has been at the tactical command level, these recommendations are generally limited to the space in which military commanders and decision makers generally operate; in the training, and education space, in preventing moral injury. For those involved in

³⁰ Litz et al., "Moral injury and moral repair in war veterans: A preliminary model and intervention strategy," 699.

³¹ Litz et al., "Moral injury and moral repair in war veterans: A preliminary model and intervention strategy," 699.

³² Litz et al., "Moral injury and moral repair in war veterans: A preliminary model and intervention strategy," 699.

clinical or pastoral care after moral injury occurs, the final few recommendations may serve to direct you towards clinical and pastoral approaches.

Training and education

In addition to the developing military ethics training the military is investing in, training and education in moral injury prevention should focus on individual's articulating their moral identity. Building on this foundation, a basic understanding of political philosophy would assist soldiers in being able to frame their moral identity in the broader context of a conservative institution which represents a morally neutral liberal democratic state, and also a morally diverse society. This would serve to forearm soldiers, helping them understand that their values may not perfectly align with national interests, and prepare them for the legitimate critique of the military that is fundamental to liberal democratic society.

Transparency

Operational security allowing, state reasons for going to war should be communicated consistently from the outset of conflict, and across all levels - strategic, operational, and tactical. Having a consistent focus from the beginning of a conflict will not only assist and protect our soldiers from moral injury but may also assist in achieving these strategic aims. Inevitably, there will be times when conflicts develop, and strategic aims change but if this is communicated from a government level rather than as tactical or operational commanders change, it will enable a stable goal post for soldiers to focus on.

Clinical and pastoral focus

Given the harmful effects of moral injury in producing shame, and serving to isolate soldiers from support networks and society, clinical and pastoral approaches must seek to address this. Time is also a factor, the 'more time passes, the more service members will be convinced and

confident that not only their actions, but they [themselves] are unforgiveable.³³ Approaches must centre around forgiveness - both external, when trust has been lost in others, and self-forgiveness; when it's personal beliefs that are betrayed. Commanders have a part to play, where immediate moral injury has occurred, they should engage with either clinical or pastoral staff in conducting moral after action reviews where soldiers are able to attempt to regain trust and grow forgiveness among their teams. Clinical staff are recommended to use the adaptive disclosure technique³⁴ to facilitate this.

Conclusion

Moral injury contains the potential for our soldiers to experience losses of trust and betrayal of beliefs, from the personal, to trust in their teams, and ultimately, in defence, Australia, and wider society. The repercussions include soldiers isolated and unable to flourish in society. Defence has a part to play; in preparing soldiers to face moral injury, by helping them to frame their place in society, understand their own moral identity, and its interplay with that of the state. Our government has a part to play in ensuring that consistent strategies are developed and communicated, to enable soldiers to have a stable focus, throughout their deployments and afterwards. Moral injury is common in war, however it doesn't mean it is inevitable or untreatable.

³³ Litz et al., "Moral injury and moral repair in war veterans: A preliminary model and intervention strategy," 700.

³⁴ Brett T. Litz et al., *Adaptive disclosure: A new treatment for military trauma, loss, and moral injury* (Guilford Publications, 2017).

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