CHAPTER 5

Moral Injury

The Psychological Impact of Morally Critical Situations

Tine Molendijk

1 Introduction

Military practice is an area of moral tension, a field where questions about right and wrong come up all the time and different values can clash with one another, giving rise to dilemmas and other moral challenges. Some moral challenges can do so much violence to one's own moral beliefs that they cause psychological damage. A soldier can develop a moral injury.

At the same time, for many soldiers, day-to-day practice could hardly feel farther removed from being 'an area of moral tension' and mentioning a term like this in the workplace may well be met with laughter by colleagues. Many soldiers will point out that to them their work is just as morally complicated as any other type of work. 'You know well what is right and wrong,' one might say with a shrug. And another might say: 'You just have to use your common sense'.

To some extent this indifference may lie in the military can-do mentality, which focuses on being concrete and solving problems, and not on doubts and using 'woolly' language such as 'area of moral tension'. Partly it will also lie in the fact that terms like these often evoke highly exceptional, Hollywood-like images, for example of snipers who must decide whether or not to kill a child. Then there is the prevailing idea that only direct confrontations with physical danger can lead to serious psychological problems, so that stress caused by other situations will easily be seen in terms of a personal shortcoming.

Upon closer examination, however, the opposite turns out to be true. Morally critical events, be they not so extreme as in Hollywood films, are relatively common in military practice, and soldiers are relatively often caught off guard by situations in which deciding what is the right thing to do is not so clear at all. In contemporary missions, soldiers often have to operate among and with the local population, while they usually have no possibilities to do anything about local poverty, disease and suffering and, moreover, it is not always clear to what extent the opponent is really a malicious enemy. When these complexities find expression in a concrete critical situation, feelings of guilt, shame or betrayal may arise. Just as shrapnel can cause a flesh wound,

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and just as a life-threatening event can disrupt a person's stress regulation, the witnessing, performing or enduring of acts that do violence to one's own moral beliefs can lead to moral injury.

This moral injury is the subject of this chapter. First, the concept of moral injury is discussed and the distinction between post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and moral injury is clarified. Subsequently, the nature and potential causes of moral injury, including political and societal aspects, will be addressed. Finally, possible answers to the problem are considered. Before all this, however, the stories of two soldiers, Bob and Gio (not their real names), are told to sketch a picture of what moral injury can mean in practice. These stories are the result of interviews conducted as part of Tine Molendijk's research into moral injury (Molendijk 2021). The stories have been somewhat generalised, to protect the anonymity of the service members involved and to make clear that the broader themes in their stories are also applicable to future missions.

2 Gio's Story: 'A Good Soldier, But Not a Good Person'

Soon after entering the service, Gio felt 'right at home in the army'. He had always been a doer and loved the action and the spirit of brotherhood existing in the armed forces. Although making the world a better place was not his primary goal, he did like the idea of 'being able to help people'. He did perceive his first deployments like that, or at least as valuable adventures in which he could put his training into practice. But this was not the case with his third deployment; that one turned out to be different.

During that mission, Gio and his unit stayed in a 'home compound' for some time. Every night in the dark he heard a boy of about fourteen crying. The boy was a *bacha*, known among Western troops as a *chai boy*. As discussed earlier in Chapter 3, this means a boy who is owned by a rich, influential man and who must provide entertainment and sexual services on demand (see also Schut & Van Baarle 2017). During the day Gio often saw the boy looking at him. He is begging for help, Gio would think to himself. 'But you weren't allowed to do anything. You couldn't take him with you, or something like that. So you'd sit there at your guard post at night and you'd hear that kid crying,' he remembers. 'It was heart-rending. And you felt like total shit.' But, tragically, that was not all. A few days later Gio heard 'that the kid had shot himself through the head with an AK'. He still lies awake at night, and torments himself, thinking: if only I had done something. He is also tormented by the fact that he was not *allowed* to do anything. It was a local custom among powerful men, and cooperation

with them was badly needed for the success of the mission. 'That kind of ambiguity gnaws at you,' says Gio. He had acted 'as a good soldier' but did not feel like 'a good person'.

After coming home Gio developed deep feelings of guilt. He started 'drinking a lot and driving fast' in order not to have to think of the things that gnawed at him. While driving he often thought: all I have to do is yank the steering wheel and it's all over. He was being self-destructive, he later realised, because he subconsciously felt he deserved it. He felt very strongly 'that I still had to be punished somehow for what had happened'. For a while, he had even entertained the paranoid idea that his mother wanted to poison him. At the same time he felt betrayed and abandoned by the military organisation and politicians. He had been deployed on a mission in which there was cooperation with child-abusing warlords, whereas nobody there had told him that having chai boys 'was also simply illegal under local law'. In addition, he and his colleagues had to do a great deal of fighting in this mission, with many civilian casualties, while the mission was 'sold as a reconstruction mission back home'. Gio experienced ambivalence regarding all these points, which he was unable to mentally resolve. He is doing better now, but it was a long struggle for him.

3 Bob's Story: 'What Am I Doing Here?'

Bob was deployed as a peacekeeper on a UN mission and was looking forward to putting his training into practice. It soon became clear, however, that this would be entirely impossible during this deployment. In this mission, UN troops had far too few resources and authorisations to carry out their tasks, and the various warring factions seemed quite unfazed by their presence. 'In practice, there was no peace to keep,' Bob would later say. The warring parties would even intentionally fire over Bob's and his colleagues' heads on a regular basis in order to harass and intimidate them. Increasingly often he began to think: what am I doing here?

One night, while on guard at a village, through his binoculars Bob saw two local fighters approaching. They fired a mortar at one of the houses, and two men came running outside. One was shot directly in the neck – 'his throat simply came off' – the other was shot dead while trying to crawl towards the first one. 'We'll shoot them to bits,' Bob told his colleagues, but their commander would not let them do anything. There were too few of them and they would have no chance if things escalated. So they did nothing. One of the fighters waved at Bob triumphantly, which he found deeply humiliating. Not long afterwards, they heard gunshots again, this time from the other party, but again the

soldiers could do nothing but take cover and wait. And this is how Bob experienced his entire deployment: hiding and waiting, powerless, not being able or allowed to do anything about the many incidents that followed.

Back in the Netherlands Bob began drinking and partying a lot. He kept his experiences to himself, fearful that people would not believe him and would confront him with difficult questions and accusations, because by then heated debates about his mission had begun in the media. His behaviour towards colleagues became volatile, and he also started acting aggressively outside work. Once he had to appear in court, 'for an act of stupidity'. In the meantime, he became more and more doubtful about his deployment: 'For a long time I managed to hold on, like, I did my best. But I began to doubt myself more and more.' Eventually he collapsed.

After prolonged treatment and a lot of talking about his experiences with his girlfriend, Bob is doing better again. He is proud of himself. He is proud of the fact that as a result of his deployment experiences he is able to see things in perspective and that he knows what is really important in life. Moreover, he is proud of his deployment itself, of what he was able to do there. At the same time, he still feels deeply guilty about all the things he was unable to achieve there and furious that he and his colleagues were sent on such an 'impossible mission'. To him, the blue UN beret he had to wear during the mission symbolises all that. He has never worn that beret again, but has not thrown it away either. After all: 'You can't throw away your past.'

4 Post-traumatic Stress Disorder and Moral Injury

For many, the stories of Gio and Bob will bring to mind the term post-traumatic stress disorder. This is today's most used term for psychological problems among soldiers, so well known that even the acronym PTSD is common usage. But is it actually the most appropriate term for experiences like those of Gio and Bob? It is of course impossible to base a diagnosis on a short story, but a few points can be noted. According to the most recent official definition, PTSD may develop after experience of or directly or indirectly witnessing 'actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence' (DSM-5 2013: 271), and according to most PTSD models fear responses are at the heart of post-traumatic stress (DePrince & Freyd 2002). Although the stories of both Gio and Bob indeed contain instances of witnessing violence, they also appear to be different from the above-mentioned characteristics. Their stories are not so much centred on exposure to threat and fear-related responses, but rather on experiences of moral conflict and resulting feelings of guilt, shame and anger.

And that is precisely what the concept of moral injury is about. Although PTSD and moral injury are not mutually exclusive and partly overlap in practice, their focus is different. There is as yet no agreement on the precise definition of moral injury – the concept is relatively new – but current research on the subject usually defines moral injury as the psychological, biological and social impact of a transgression of deeply held beliefs and expectations, of which the morally injured person may have been the victim, the witness or the perpetrator, at least in his/her own eyes (see Frankfurt & Frazier 2016; Litz et al. 2009; Shay 2014). Unlike in the case of PTSD, in moral injury the emphasis is specifically on the moral dimension of shocking events.

A first conceptual model of moral injury was introduced in 2009 (Litz et al. 2009). Since then, the concept has rapidly gained currency in research, treatment and policy aimed at soldiers and veterans. This is not surprising considering the statistics. Take, for example, a recent survey among US service members. More than 10 percent of them reported having been involved in moral transgressions and more than 25 percent had witnessed moral transgressions committed by others (Wisco et al. 2017). In another survey more than 25 percent of the subjects indicated that they had experienced 'ethical situations' in which they did not know how to respond (MHAT-V 2008). Regarding the impact of such events, several studies show percentages between 5 and 25 of service personnel suffering from feelings of guilt, shame or anger resulting from their deployment experiences (Bryan et al. 2016; Currier et al. 2015; Wisco et al. 2017).

According to the literature on the subject, potentially morally injurious events include the injury and killing of others, the inability to prevent suffering among colleagues or civilians, and omissions by a leader or other authority (Griffin et al. 2019). This enumeration shows that moral injury is not the preserve of personnel deployed on combat missions, but may also occur in peacekeeping operations. A study among Dutch veterans of peacekeeping missions confirms this. Of the peacekeepers surveyed, a quarter admitted to feelings of guilt about the deployment, and at least a third of this quarter said that this guilt had caused substantial suffering (Rietveld 2015). Furthermore, it is plausible that professional groups such as medical and police personnel are also at risk of developing moral injury. In fact, considering that life has bigger and smaller moral dilemmas in store for all of us, it seems that every person could, to a greater or lesser degree, become morally injured.

It would certainly be wrong to think that in PTSD research the moral dimension of trauma has gone unnoticed all this time. Indeed, when the concept of PTSD gained prominence in the 1980s in connection with the Vietnam War, a great deal of attention was paid to both guilt and anger

directed towards military and political leaders (see, for example, Lifton 1973). And although these moral emotions became underexposed in the decades that followed, they are back in the picture nowadays. The most recent definition of PTSD even explicitly mentions as a possible symptom of PTSD: 'persistent, distorted cognitions about the cause or consequences of the traumatic event(s) that lead the individual to blame himself/herself or others.' (DSM-5 2013: 272). But, as this description also suggests, in current PTSD research guilt and blame are mainly treated as resulting from irrational thoughts, i.e. as misplaced emotions. By contrast, the literature on moral injury explicitly goes against such an approach, and the term 'injury' instead of 'disorder' is no coincidence. Moral injury emphasises that moral considerations and judgments should be taken seriously, and that feelings of guilt, shame and/or betrayal should therefore be considered potentially 'appropriate' emotions (see also Table 5.1). Indeed, it is moral considerations and emotions that make a person human.

TABLE 5.1 Current PTSD models and Moral Injury model

	Current PTSD models	**Moral Injury model**
Cause	(Life-)threatening situation *The perception of safety is harmed*	Situation that transgresses moral beliefs and expectations *The perception of a just world is harmed*
The individual's role in the situation	Victim or witness	Victim, witness or (in his/her own eyes) person responsible
Central emotions	Fear-related emotions, such as feelings of danger and threat	Moral emotions, such as feelings of guilt, shame and betrayal
Approach to possible judgment of oneself or others	Misplaced, result of 'distorted cognitions', deresponsibilisation needed	Appropriate, (self-) forgiveness needed where applicable

5 Individual Dimensions of Moral Injury

In the armed forces personnel often refer to a moral code or compass when speaking about ethics. Although to an extent these are suitable metaphors for a person's values and moral standards, it is important to realise that they never form a neatly harmonious unity, but always a complex, even 'messy' whole (Tessman 2014; Zigon 2008). This applies to all people, including, and perhaps even specifically, to soldiers. Like all people, soldiers are part of a family, a circle of friends, various subcultures and society as a whole, and all these social spheres have their own specific values and moral standards that are not necessarily neatly in tune with one another. In addition, soldiers belong to a military community, with values and standards that may be at odds with those of society and, moreover, may conflict with each other: soldiers must be loyal to their 'brotherhood' but also guarantee the safety of civilians, and in doing so they must at all times comply with their political mission (see also Chapters 1 and 4). Moreover, they must try to manage all these values and moral standards in high-risk environments, as potential targets, witnesses and performers of violence (Baarda & Verweij 2006).

Given these complexities, it is not surprising that soldiers can experience situations that lead to feelings of guilt, shame or betrayal. Partly because of the complexities mentioned above, these situations themselves are often characterised by conflict. We see this, for example, in the stories of Gio and Bob and their experience of a conflict between being a good soldier and a good person. It also applies to the moral dilemma discussed in Chapter 2 and the cases of moral disengagement described in Chapter 3, in which service members transgressed moral boundaries that they would not have transgressed under normal circumstances, because these boundaries were less clear-cut at that moment. These types of experiences are more complex than the unambiguous feeling that a moral code has *undeniably* been violated, or that one's moral compass has *undeniably* been deviated from. Such experiences engender feelings of conflict.

Such experiences may cause morally injured soldiers to suffer feelings of guilt and shame as well as anger towards others, or even towards the world at large. In addition, soldiers can become morally disoriented, and become profoundly confused about matters that previously seemed to be just common sense. All kinds of questions can arise, such as: 'Was I a good soldier, and is a good soldier also a good person?', 'Do my feelings of guilt make me a good or a bad person?', 'How can you possibly do good in situations that force you to choose between two evils?' and 'What do good and bad mean anyway?' These are ethical questions that under normal circumstances are asked mainly by

ethicists and moral psychologists, but when they come up as a result of moral injury, they are no longer abstract scientific questions, but deeply personal and often very painful ones. They can make morally injured soldiers lose confidence in the goodness of both themselves and the world surrounding them, and even in the idea of goodness itself (for a more extensive discussion of this point, see Molendijk 2018b).

6 Political and Societal Dimensions of Moral Injury

As mentioned above, morally injured soldiers may also develop anger, for example towards politics and society (for an elaboration of this section, see Molendijk 2018a and Molendijk 2019). Soldiers are instruments of the state, who do their work in the name of society, as noted in Chapter 1. Therefore, as a feature specific to military practice, questions about good and evil do not remain in the soldier's private sphere, but are explicitly raised and discussed in the political and societal domains. The missions in Vietnam, Rwanda and Bosnia are notorious examples of how failures in political decision-making can have disastrous consequences. Logically, they also offer examples of the heated public debates that may follow. Although these examples are extreme, they are not in principle unique. Many soldiers deployed on a great many different missions, like Gio and Bob, have stories to tell about how political and public practices created difficult situations during and after their deployment.

To start with the impact of political practices: if soldiers experience morally injurious events during their deployment and if they perceive these to have been related to avoidable political failure, this may cause a strong sense of political betrayal. That feeling can in turn manifest itself in distrust, anger, and, more concretely, in seeking satisfaction. For example, hundreds of Dutch Bosnia veterans have recently sued the government for the emotional damage they have incurred as a result of their deployment. Formally, their collective claim was for financial compensation, but many veterans were above all seeking symbolic compensation in the form of recognition. They saw a lawsuit, as one of them put it, 'as the only way to make the state pay for its failure' (Molendijk 2021). When the government announced it was to undertake a large-scale investigation of the healthcare needs of Bosnia veterans, they consequently dropped their collective financial claim.

Where exactly do such profound feelings of betrayal and this need for satisfaction and recognition come from? It starts with the fact that the relationship between the soldier and the state is one of dependency. This is a relationship in which the stakes are significant. They concern the physical and mental

well-being of soldiers, and even their lives. In order to do their job properly, soldiers must therefore trust that they are in good hands with their own government, or at least not in the wrong hands. If this relationship of dependency and trust is damaged, the soldier may experience this is as violation of a vital moral relationship. This explains the feeling of betrayal and the need for satisfaction. This betrayal can be felt in relation to the state and the government, and also in relation to the organisation or, even more specifically, the commander (see also Chapter 1 regarding the importance of 'recognition').

In addition to betrayal by the political leadership or the organisation, military personnel may experience misrecognition by society. This perceived misrecognition is not primarily, or at least not exclusively, about a lack of appreciation. Of course, soldiers are affected when the media report negatively on how they behaved on a mission, especially if their immediate environment starts to believe they acted culpably. But heroic images and stories in which soldiers are portrayed as trauma victims are often also problematic for soldiers, because soldiers who have acted against their own values simply do not tend to feel heroic or worthy of pity. The societal misrecognition that soldiers can perceive is mainly about the feeling that their own deployment experiences become oversimplified and contorted in public opinion, and that they themselves are transformed into caricatures such as 'perpetrator', 'hero' or 'victim'. In this sense, misrecognition therefore means that their experiences are reduced to oversimplifications and that they are not viewed as human beings.

This simplification is the reason why misrecognition can be called morally injurious: injustice is being done to one's experience. And particularly when a person struggles with shocking events, that person will likely feel a need for recognition by others, even more so when the events are about injustice. Perceived misrecognition may therefore also lead to great anger, alienation and self-isolation. In addition, a mismatch with public opinion can seriously hamper soldiers in identifying and coming to terms with their experiences, because it means that existing stories in society will not provide them with the appropriate words to describe these experiences. Finally, looking at themselves through the eyes of others, soldiers may develop feelings of guilt and shame which they otherwise might not have.

7 Doing Justice to Moral Injury

How to deal with moral injury? As we have seen, moral injury can, at least in part, be considered an ethical struggle with questions of good and evil. It is for this reason that feelings of guilt, shame or anger should not be dismissed

too easily as unnecessary or misplaced, but should be seen as possibly justified. Brushing them aside will not help the person in question and may even aggravate the moral injury. After all, ignoring moral emotions means not doing justice to these emotions (see also Molendijk 2018a; Shay 1994).

Of course, it may be that the soldier with moral injury places an exaggerated amount of blame on himself or others. In practice, however, a person's responsibility for a situation almost always lies somewhere between zero and full responsibility, and feelings of guilt, shame or anger therefore still have their place. At the same time, it might be useful to help morally injured soldiers in contemplating different perspectives, not for them to change their mind and judgment, but to help them get a better grip on the issue. Ultimately, it may be necessary for a morally injured soldier to seek forgiveness for himself or others. However, doing so is no simple matter. Forgiveness is a process that takes time, and only meaningful if it is sincere (Litz et al. 2015).

In order to prevent moral injury, it is first of all crucial to recognise and acknowledge the existence of the phenomenon. This implies, among other things, that training should not only focus on stressors such as exchanges of fire, but also on stress arising from confrontations with injustice, moral dilemmas and moral disengagement. Furthermore, it is important that attention be given to the moral tensions such situations may cause, and that moral transgressions that occur as a result are not readily condoned, but taken seriously. More specifically, it should be recognised that insoluble conflicts can arise between personal and professional values and between professional values and a political mission, and, additionally, that the usefulness of a deployment may seem questionable. However tempting it may be to give a more reassuring message, 'imposing' justifications and a sense of meaning will aggravate rather than heal a moral injury (see also Eidelson et al. 2011).

Knowledge of ethical concepts can be useful for learning to recognise and acknowledge morally injurious situations. Someone who does not know what exactly terms like values, moral standards and moral dilemmas mean will not be able to communicate about moral injury. This demonstrates once again the added value of ethics education. Currently, however, ethics education is largely confined to the classroom, where moral dilemmas are easily transformed into brainteasers instead of concrete situations in which emotions and stress can play an important role (Thompson & Jetly 2014). Linking ethics explicitly to field exercises, however, would make it possible to train moral resilience in a realistic manner.

Having said this, it should be acknowledged that preventing moral injury is only partly within soldiers' own control. Military practice is a collective affair. The missions on which military personnel are to be deployed, and what they

should and should not do there, are determined at the political level, and debates about whether or not a mission was justified and useful are held at a broader social level. Solutions for moral injury should therefore be sought not only at the level of the individual soldier, but also at the levels of political decision-making and public debates.

At the political level, moral principles such as those of the Just War Tradition (see also Chapter 1) must be effectively included in the decision-making process regarding military intervention. These principles are embedded in international humanitarian law (including the Geneva Conventions and the Charter of the United Nations) and also in the criteria that many national governments have developed for themselves to guide decision-making on the deployment of military personnel. All this is to ensure that military units are deployed for just reasons and do their job in a just manner. Moral principles must therefore be genuinely taken into account in decision-making processes, and not just be ticked off as if they are part of a legal checklist (Verweij & Molendijk 2019). That is easier said than done. Equally important, therefore, is that government do not attempt to paint a pretty picture when communicating about military missions, but dare to be transparent and honest. The more transparent and honest the political decision-making is, the more protection it will provide against moral injury, and vice versa.

At the social level, rituals, such as the purification and reintegration rites that warriors had to undergo in earlier societies, can be valuable. Instead of making portrayals such as 'perpetrator', 'hero' or 'victim', these rituals were in fact based on nuanced ideas about the moral complexity of military practice. Take, for example, the rituals of early Christianity. Returning warriors routinely participated in various acts of atonement and cleansing so as to be purified from the moral 'pollution' of war. The warriors were not seen as sinners, but as people who had been involved in the 'justified evil' of war (Verkamp 1993). Such rituals are still extant in some societies, for example in southern African communities where they serve to release returning soldiers of the spirits of people who were killed (Granjo & Nicolini 2006).

In most western countries we no longer have institutionalised rituals of this kind. Instead, most of us are simultaneously fascinated and deeply uncomfortable when it comes to the reality of military intervention. As a result, we try to keep war and everything related to it far from us (Molendijk 2018a, 2021). However, it appears that veterans struggling with their experiences sometimes create their own rituals, for example by returning as a group to their area of deployment in order to walk a march together with the local population (Hetebrij 2010). The existence of such self-made rituals demonstrates their importance, and at the same time the current lack of them in our society. It

would therefore seem useful to look at the activities that veterans themselves have initiated.

8 Conclusion

In view of the fact that military practice is by definition an area of moral tension, moral injury can never be prevented completely. More generally, we must accept that moral injury is a tragic risk of life. However, there prove to be interventions of varying effectiveness for dealing with this problem and the risk it poses. As a basic principle it has been established that recognition and acknowledgment of moral injury is very important, not only in the aftermath of deployment, but also well before it. The focus should be not only on the individual via training and therapy, but also at the levels of the military organisation, politics and society, through ethically sensitive decision-making, honest and well-nuanced communication and adequate military reintegration. In other words, it is important to *do justice* to moral injury.

In relation to this, it is important to ask whether moral injury should be seen only as a mental health issue, or also as something different or broader in scope. As a health problem it may easily end up in the domain of mental disorders, while moral injury appears to be more than only a mental disorder in the strict sense. Moral injury can also partly be understood as a painful moral-philosophical struggle, one that is not necessarily a question of misplaced emotions and thoughts, but an adequate response to moral dilemmas and to 'disorder' at the political and societal levels. More fundamentally, moral injury is about the loss of innocence in two senses: innocence within the meaning of not being guilty, and innocence within the meaning of unfamiliarity with the evil side of the world.

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