

Introduction

Jesse Kirkpatrick and Daniel Rothenberg^{*} 

In August 2021, the United States withdrew from Afghanistan, ending a twenty year war—the longest in American history. The past two decades of armed conflict, fought in complex environments among civilian populations, provided daily reminders of the ethical complexities of warfare. One concept that provides a promising path for reflection on such complexities is moral injury.

While the idea that the experience of war severely impacts soldiers and others dates back to antiquity, moral injury is a contemporary concept. It was first developed to address forms of trauma suffered by U.S. veterans of the Vietnam War and the post-9/11 conflicts. The concept references the psychological harm associated with how war damages individuals' core ethical conceptions, often leading to significant and debilitating suffering. This concept has proven to be enormously useful in clinical settings and it reaffirms the social and individual importance of ethics.

Despite its practical and philosophical value, the concept of moral injury is still in early stages of development. There is currently no consensus as to how moral injury is defined. Nor is it clear exactly what events produce moral injury, under what circumstances moral injury occurs, who may perpetrate this form of harm, and who can be morally injured. For this reason, there is a pressing need for additional research on the subject, especially for work that clarifies the concept theoretically, grounds its application empirically, and explores more robust clinical methodologies. New research on moral injury may help harmonize philosophical considerations of the concept with empirical data, thereby validating the construct

Jesse Kirkpatrick, George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia, United States (jkirkpat@gmu.edu)

Daniel Rothenberg, Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona, United States (Daniel.Rothenberg@asu.edu)

*Development of this roundtable was supported by National Endowment for the Humanities award number AV-26061518.

Ethics & International Affairs, 36, no. 1 (2022), pp. 3–5.

© The Author(s), 2022. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs

doi:10.1017/S089267942200003X

and clarifying its definition. Ultimately, critical reflections on moral injury can inform improved deliberations and political decision-making surrounding war and peace.

Although it is a relatively new idea, moral injury remains a powerful concept. As David Wood argues in his contribution to this collection, moral injury provides a way for civilians to approach the experience of veterans, encouraging empathetic and nonjudgmental listening. As such, the term provides a key mechanism for bridging the civil-military divide and may help us better understand and address the rising toll of military veteran suicides.

Daniel Rothenberg argues that while moral injury has generally been applied at the individual level, it can also contribute to understanding the societal impact of war and other forms of political violence. His essay explores the value of moral injury for international human rights work, especially efforts to confront state terror, authoritarian rule, and the systematic commission of atrocities.

Jesse Kirkpatrick's essay underscores the need for more research on moral injury and the importance of attaining greater conceptual clarity and empirical data. He considers the ways in which increased attention to the concept may significantly contribute to the theoretical development of just war theory.

This roundtable collection grew out of a symposium hosted by New America in 2019. The event was part of a broader research initiative, the Coming Home Project, which brought together academics, military leaders, veterans, journalists, and clinicians. The discussions focused on the value of the humanities for exploring the moral, psychological, and spiritual effects of armed conflict on the warrior as she or he returns home. The three-year project was supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities and managed by the Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy at George Mason University and the Stockdale Center for Ethical Leadership at the U.S. Naval Academy, in partnership with the Center on the Future of War, which links Arizona State University and New America.

Over the years, the Coming Home Project has led to dozens of outputs and collaborations and incurred many debts of gratitude. We owe a special thanks to Dr. Ian Fishback, who died in November 2021. Ian was part of the Coming Home Project since its inception. His participation was in keeping with his moral courage and willingness to engage in some of the most difficult conversations on the ethical impacts of war. Ian will be remembered for many things—he was a West Point graduate, a retired special forces major, a soldier who served multiple deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, and a burgeoning academic who recently

earned a PhD. Ian was perhaps best known for blowing the whistle on torture committed by the U.S. military, prompting the U.S. Senate to approve anti-torture legislation in 2005. This roundtable is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Ian Fishback.