**“PTSD Weaponized; a Theory of Moral Injury”**[[1]](#footnote-1)

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**Abstract**: This paper first gives a conceptual analysis of that form of Post-Traumatic Stress Injury which is variously described as moral injury, moral exhaustion, moral fatigue or broken spirit. The paper elucidates several puzzles and paradoxes in the concept that must be sorted out before we can know how to treat such injury. For example, one form of moral injury is suicidal guilt from perpetrating even killings that were morally justified, or for which the soldier would be exonerated by an excusing condition. Why then does she feel guilty? Is this form of injury necessarily based in an error of moral self-evaluation? Relatedly making moral decisions in war is said to be extremely stressing. But again, why should this be so in comparison with other sorts of decision? After all, where one aims to do the morally right thing and it is clear what to do, there is no occasion for moral agonizing over the decision. While if it is not clear, even if you get the decision wrong, this couldn’t have been helped, so again, there is nothing to morally agonize over. The explanations for these phenomena are complex, but one possibility is that, while the soldier or commander may have done the all-things-considered right thing and so should feel no guilt on that account, she still had to make a choice among evils; and even if she chose the lesser evil, she still had to impose an evil on someone. This goes against our natural empathy and moral training.

The paper then explores the likelihood of this injury – specifically its tendency to cause suicide -- being preventable or treatable with emotion numbing drugs. It argues that while moral injury is not just an injury of felt emotion and so can’t be perfectly handled this way, under some conditions such drugs could help. Various moral arguments against using such drugs are dealt with.

Next, since moral injury is an injury, it can be weaponized. The paper explores the feasibility of this, the morality of using moral injury as a method of warfare, and some historical precedents; and it reflects on proper rules of deployment of it and methods of defense from it. One theme here is that some moral injuries, those caused by the violation of false moral views and absurd cult doctrines, are objectively lesser harms than kinetic injuries, but sometimes even more effective in changing enemy behaviors. They should therefore be used as the lesser of evils, and their use is therefore less likely to cause guilt and so moral injury in their perpetrators. But there are puzzles here too. For even a moral injury caused by the violation of an absurd moral code psychologically harms the person who holds the code – someone might be shocked and morally disoriented by the desecration of their religious symbols, even if, in fact, their religion is false. How are we to balance the psychological reality of the moral harm with the objective fact that no real harm has been done by desecrating a false text? Finally, how are we to protect ourselves from moral pseudo-injury by the violation of erroneous parts of our own moral codes?

**1. Introduction: What is Moral Injury? What Are Its Causes?**

This essay is about a very specific sort of post-traumatic stress injury, namely, moral injury. A person’s morality is constituted by her feelings and judgements of which sorts of actions are right and which wrong, what sort of character one ought to have, what can be expected of decent people, and what can be taken for granted in a socially safe world, one in which people may be expected to behave in morally decent ways. If you believe in God, part of your moral outlook might include the idea that because the world is supervised by a divine being things will tend to work out for the best. And where they don’t, there will be good reasons deriving from the norms governing how people should act and what should happen to them when they violate those norms. (If you sin, bad things should happen to you, otherwise not.) Moral injury is said to occur when a person becomes profoundly troubled, perhaps to the point of being suicidal, by having been morally mistreated, witnessing moral mistreatment, or perpetrating moral mistreatment. An example of the first would be being betrayed by a fellow soldier, commander or politician (e.g., discovering that the war in which one fought was unjust), of the second, witnessing a fellow soldier commit some atrocity, of the third, finding yourself having to kill someone to save your troop, finding that you have inadvertently killed an innocent in battle, or realizing that you yourself have committed an atrocity.

For the sake of argument I shall suppose that there exists such a phenomenon, and that its problematic effects owe mainly to the violation of a person’s moral expectations. There is controversy about whether the phenomenon exists, however, and if it does, about whether it can be understood conceptually or causally separately from such things as a gross physical injury yielding shock, pain, debilitation, sleeplessness or hormonal imbalance, or from subtle physical injury yielding brain damage, or from befuddlement by the chaos one experienced, ostracism by one’s community, the disorientations involved in returning to a calmer life, lack of money, difficulty finding employment[[2]](#footnote-2), or incentivized malingering, possibly unconsciously, from the availability of disability pay.[[3]](#footnote-3) Nevertheless, I shall suppose that there is such a thing as being damaged simply by having experienced, witnessed or perpetrated some violation of morality. Such injury is probably dose-dependent – the more of such things one experiences, the greater one’s likelihood of being morally injured and the worse the injury is likely to be. But the injury might take different forms in different people, including extreme fearfulness, numbing, moral callousing, depression and suicidality.

It is not clear how prevalent moral injury is, nor how many people suicide from it, nor whether in the populations where it occurs suicide is more common than in other populations – I see conflicting numbers in statistics about American and Canadian soldiers involved in Afghanistan, for example, and in statistical comparisons between soldiers and similar-aged civilians.

As with other sorts of harm, probably people vary in how susceptible they are, and in how able to recover; probably there are more or less good ways to treat it, and different people may require different sorts of treatment.

Further, since this kind of injury arises from violation of one’s moral expectations, probably whether one will be injured by a given experience will depend partly on whether one has moral views and expectations of a sort that will be challenged in the situations one faces. Thus people with different conceptions of morality might be injured by different environments. But this is compatible with the possibility that some specific moral expectations are found in nearly all persons, either from evolved hard-wiring, or from almost inevitably being formed as part of being a social animal, and therefore as part of living in groups. For the very existence of groups requires and so presupposes that people treat each other in certain ways, and so sustain certain normative expectations in and of each other.

Next, either way, it may be that to understand this sort of injury, we must see its victims as being in part victims of their own nation’s moral attitudes and political policies. For the nation’s moral attitudes will create persons, including war fighters, of a certain moral sensibility, while the nation’s political policies may put its warfighters in situations likely to result in the violation of their moral expectations, and so in moral injury. For example, suppose one is from a religious nation that teaches that it is always sinful to kill. Suppose one’s nation’s religion puts one in a war with a nation of conflicting religion and so sends some of its citizens to kill in war. Then this nation’s moral education produces citizens likely to be traumatized by the killing they will have to do during this war. If moral injury is a disease, then, we must think of it as in part a political disease, one of the polity of the war-fighter. Unlike other diseases, this one may be eradicable, if not necessarily curable in a given sufferer, simply by a change in political policy (or, of course, by a change in the nation’s moral outlook).[[4]](#footnote-4) The foregoing case of moral injury sustained in religiously premised war is a case in point: the occasions of moral trauma would vanish if the nation’s policies didn’t allow religiously premised wars; or if its religion didn’t represent all killing as a sin.

A further factor in whether one will sustain moral injury may be one’s motivation in being a war fighter. Many people in the volunteer army are tender-hearted – they join with the aim of altruistic service, almost as if a member of one of the helping professions; yet they witness the opposite of this motive all the time, and are often forced to act inimically to helping motives. I think of the horror stories told to me by people tasked with reconstruction of one war zone or another, people who have philosophies of leadership premised on the idea that it is better to have people be motivated by love rather than fear or greed, and yet who regularly witness the violation of these expectations by others, and so have their hearts broken over and over.

Other people may be in the forces out of a sense of honor and so might be particularly susceptible to self-condemnation if they witness and can’t prevent dishonorable behavior, or if they end up perpetrating or being victim of it. On the other hand, those who join from mercenary impulse, or as thrill seekers, or because they are from families of career soldiers going back generations, may be less susceptible to moral injury, the first because of callousness, the second, because they seek and are titillated by the experience of combat and killing, the third, because they’ve been trained from birth to understand the character of war. Another sort of person perhaps unlikely to experience moral injury is someone well versed in the meta-moral arts of forgiveness, or someone morally intelligent enough to be able to see right away that excusing and justifying conditions for her conduct are present, so that her feeling guilty would be inappropriate. Yet another would be someone well-loved and so very stable from childhood, and so someone unlikely to see himself in a disproportionately bad light if he has to be the perpetrator of a problematic killing. Likewise for certain disordered personality types, for example, narcissists, who are more likely to project responsibility and judgements of wrong-doing onto others than to take it upon themselves. Likewise for pessimists, who may not be surprised at bad conduct from supervisors, peers or even themselves. And also, for similar reasons, people from environments of very low moral expectation.

Whether moral injury will be common might also depend on moral the character of the war itself, and on the morally relevant aspects of the specific contexts in which people are called upon to kill. If what triggers moral injury is having responsibility for committing morally questionable actions, then making sure that the actions are in fact morally legitimate and that the moral arguments in favor of them have been extensively rehearsed, or making sure that the actions occur with attenuated responsibility, may prevent moral injury. If the war is a just war against vile enemies perhaps guilt will be less likely. Likewise if one is fighting as a conscript rather than as a volunteer. For perhaps the fact that one is fighting under coercion will make one feel morally relieved of responsibility for any killing one engages in.[[5]](#footnote-5) Another thing that might be morally relieving is fighting with clear rules of engagement so that one is merely carrying out a decision made by someone higher up about who to kill and when. And arguably those decisions being made as high up as possible, and as far as possible from the battlefield and so from the direct emotional effects of battle and killing, the less moral injury there will be. For the soldier is then merely following orders, while the commander giving the orders never has to directly experience killing, and both parties are thereby saved from guilt.

But admittedly these last few claims are conjectural. For it may be that a killing is more easily born if engaged in with full reflection and deliberation. There is some evidence that killing that is done instead from extreme prior conditioning and reflex-building may make more moral trauma for the killer, since all the moral processing of the killing occurs only after the fact. Relatedly, killing that has a direct self-defense motive may be more easily borne than killing done from a distance and not under personal threat – killing by drone, for example – since the latter feels unnecessary and so insufficiently morally pretexted. And one can imagine this being a problem for those who kill by commanding others to kill rather than directly – especially if they witness the killing directly or telemetrically. This may be an argument for shielding commanders ever more from this sort of experience the higher up the chain of command one goes and so the more killing for which one’s orders may make one responsible. Of course there are obvious limits on the moral advisability of this precaution, since too much of it may overly insulate decision-makers from the moral significance of their decisions – more on this in a moment.

Those sorts of issues apart, the foregoing seems to be a fairly uncontroversial characterization of moral injury. But there is also much in the very concept of such injury that is puzzling. I turn now to these puzzles, things we must sort out if we are to understand this injury’s meaning, prevention and treatment.

**Part 2. Puzzles About Moral Injury**

**Moral Injury as Based in Misplaced Guilt?**

A strange fact about certain a form of moral injury is that it seems predicated on a kind of error of self-judgment. For paradigms of moral injury are feeling guilty for having killed someone even if for a good reason, or even if the killing was by inadvertence. In the first case, there was a justification for the action, so that it was a morally right action, and so there is nothing properly to feel guilt about; while in the second, there was an excuse – what happened was not one’s fault – so again there is nothing properly to feel guilty for. So it seems the phenomenon is born of a mistaken moral attitude. But then contrary to some of the approaches mooted above, it may be that no amount of making sure that a soldier’s killing is a just killing, or is a killing for which he has attenuated responsibility, will do much to prevent him being morally injured by his actions.

**On the Possibility of Preventing Moral Injury by Moral Offloading**

If this is true, we might try to prevent moral injury not by making sure that only just or excused killing is called for, but by taking decisions to kill away from the soldier – we will save his conscience by “moral offloading”. E.g., maybe we can offload the moral burden onto autonomous weapons systems that will do the killing for us, thereby sparing us unbearable guilt. But then, someone must program the weapons and someone must order them into battle. And here arguably we place people at risk of a different kind of violation of their moral sensibilities. True, the soldier in battle must make decisions under conditions of extreme fear, exhaustion, distraction by physical chaos and personal physical discomfort, and must make choices, especially when dealing with insurgencies interpenetrating civilian populations, that require the making of subtle discriminations (can the person approaching the troop be trusted?), and require that they be made instantly. But commanders and programmers may face a guilt of their own.

For one hears not just of moral injury, but moral fatigue, moral exhaustion. This phenomenon raises many questions of its own. What is moral fatigue? Is it different from other kinds of fatigue? Is it compatible with morality having bright lines, or is it caused by having to make distinctions among shades of grey over and over again? Is it simple frustration at having to continually engage evil, or at being regularly disappointed by the behaviour of people? Is it something that can be cited in exculpation of moral error? Would virtuous people be victim of it, perhaps even more than non-virtuous? Is it being used against us as a weapon? E.g., is it part of what makes terrorism effective as a strategy, namely, that it wears people down morally? And what is to be done about it? How do we stop it from affecting people? Or should it be stopped? Maybe it's a sign of moral goodness in people and we should instead reduce our expectations about people engaged in these sorts of struggles, perhaps by limiting their exposure – their dosage. Is it something at risk of impairing even the President and his decisions? Should it be taken into account in the philosophy of leadership and in the instruction of armed forces members? Who needs to be on guard against it, e.g., military personnel, policy makers, the public, even academics like us? (I know I've felt wearied from the horrors in the news, and sometimes despair of ever coming to terms with these events intellectually, philosophically and as someone trying to find solid premises from which to deduce policy.)

But before we get into all of these issues (and we certainly can’t get into all of them here), we must address the central question of why those tasked with making moral decisions even outside of the stress of battle contexts should experience their own form of moral injury, namely, moral fatigue. What is especially fatiguing about making those decisions?

**The Puzzle of the Difficulty of Moral Decision Making**

So, on to the form of moral injury commanders are supposedly especially susceptible to, namely, the moral exhaustion and self-condemnation that comes from having repeatedly to make morally difficult decisions, to order morally difficult things. It is puzzling what is so difficult about making moral decisions compared to making other kinds of decision. For in any given case either it is clear what to do or it is not. If it is then the right decision is obvious, so why is it a decision difficult to make? Why should it be likely to produce guilt? Meanwhile, if the decision is not obvious, then whomever makes it would have an excuse or justification for any error, in neither case being liable to moral recrimination. So again it’s puzzling why the decision would be difficult – especially difficult in some way particular to morality -- and why it’s likely to yield guilt.

**Explanations of These Puzzling Phenomena**

One explanation for these susceptibilities to misplaced moral self-condemnation and fatigue in soldiers and commanders may be that, while they are well-schooled in the moral codes by which they live, they are not so in the wise application of moral reprobation and forgiveness upon violation of the code. We teach children moral codes with great alacrity and they retain these lessons into adulthood. But we are less likely to teach them the principles of kindness, mercy, forgiveness and self-compassion in the application of moral codes, in part because we think it is not up to them whether they are to be forgiven – that is for their community, or a judge, or God.

At any rate, the mere fact that one has violated a moral code is not itself purely decisive of the degree of blame and self-hate one should be in for. One should be in for less to the degree that one’s violation of the code was justified or excused, for example. But since war is such an unusual context relative to most people’s experiences, war fighters are inexperienced in what sort of thing should count as a justifying or excusing condition for an action prima facie violating a moral code. For example, in a soldier’s life but not a civilian’s, it may be a justification or excuse for killing that one was under an order.

Another fact that should figure in determining one’s degree of condemnability is one’s own personal history of victimhood. A battered wife who kills may lack immediate justification – on the day there may not have been an act of her husband she can plausibly cite as making her killing a justified act of self-defense. And she might not, on that day, have recourse to excusing conditions such as inadvertence or accident. But her history of abuse may mean that, even if she is convicted of a crime, it should be a lesser crime, or she should get a lesser sentence. Perhaps she reacted with lethal force to a minor immediate provocation but also to an accumulation of provocations; so her crime was one of passion, or perhaps no crime at all – she might not have been in her right head. Likewise for soldiers. We must consider what they’ve been through lest we judge too quickly. And again, we might be unexperienced about which historical facts in a soldier’s life can be exculpatory.

**Other Possible Explanations of Why Moral Decision-Making is Difficult and Exhausting**

Another possible explanation of the difficulty of and of guilt from moral decision making might be that any moral decision is also at the same time another kind of decision, one that, for reasons unrelated to morality, is difficult. And since doing an immoral action is something necessarily committed by doing some other action – we always do immoral action x by means of doing some other action y, e.g., murder someone by hitting them in the head -- it would be unsurprising if at least some morally evaluable actions are difficult for reasons unrelated to morality. Some decisions and conditions of decision are hard anyway – decisions that must be made fast, or on little sleep, or under personal threat, or with poor, conflicting or rapidly changing information, or taking account of many factors, or that involve balancing strongly conflicting values, or that must be made according to parameters of goodness in decision-making that are in effect being improvised as we go along; or because they are decisions no one would ordinarily voluntarily emplace themselves to have to make – they are thrust upon us only by such extremely unwelcome events as war. But the difficulty of moral decisions almost certainly owes to more than just these factors.

One possible reason why these things are experienced as difficult is that they may present us with a conflict between competing moral considerations – e.g., immediately felt love and empathy for others on the one hand, and more cerebrally registered all-things-considered moral requirements taking into account consequences for large numbers of people on the other. There may be a conclusive consequentialist argument for me having to kill someone, say, but there is still the fact that I’ll have to kill someone for whom I’m going to have empathy. And empathy is formed quickly – in mere seconds as our eyes focus on each other and we notice this focusing, for example.[[6]](#footnote-6) And even where we don’t actually meet those we must kill, we know that they are people, and we can’t help but imagine them as beings with whom we could, would, or should empathize. Think of having to put a pet down. The pet is clearly in pain, ending its suffering is the best course, but it’s still difficult – one doesn’t want to have to say goodbye to one’s friend, and it is hard to bear the idea of the suffering, fear and sadness they may feel in their dying moments.

A phenomenon related to this that might be explanatory of the difficulty of making moral decisions is that arguably they typically put two of one’s mental systems, the so-called fast and slow systems, into conflict.[[7]](#footnote-7) The fast system is intuitive, emotional and habitual, and so gives an impulse towards moral judgements instantly upon apprehension of a situation calling for them. The slow system is deliberative, pre-habitual, abstract, argument-considering and argument-responsive, requiring higher-order cognitive processing. It therefore takes longer to produce its judgments, and may yield ones at odds with the fast system’s. The conflict may be metaphorically described as your heart/gut telling you one thing, your head, another.

Interestingly, the fast-slow difference may have different effects depending on what one’s relation is to battle. If one is engaged in actual battle where one’s killing has a self-defensive element, perhaps one’s fast system will judge a killing morally OK, while one’s slow system may retroactively percolate a doubt. Meanwhile, the slow systems in the minds of political and military commanders may judge some ordered killing just, but the fast systems of the soldiers who must do the killing might have the reverse judgment when they see exactly who they have to kill and how. And a soldier’s slow-system-generated later guilt may put her at odds with the slow-system-formulated policies of those politically and militarily in charge of the war.

Another reason moral decision making in war is difficult might be this: almost all new things are difficult at first, and killing someone for the first time is as new as something gets.

Yet another reason is that killing goes against so much of our training, both training into physical habits -- killing is something we acquire such habits to avoid, e.g., in the form of good driving skills – and social and moral habits. We all know that killing is only wrong all other things equal, but most of us are unpracticed in the un-equal circumstances of war. A further factor about these sorts of decisions is that there is a much higher level of accountability for them – they will be reviewed, and ones found wrong will be recriminated.

Then there is the fact of social expectations: we spend most of our time in environments where we’d be censored for doing what must be done in war.

Further, while our moral sensibilities have been mainly evolved for interactions in small groups, the considerations that justify wars involve relations between much larger groups. So these are foreign to us and difficult to balance against small-group, interpersonal morality.

Perhaps many of these factors boil down to one: while the soldier or commander may have done the all-things-considered right thing and so should feel no guilt on that account, she still had to make a choice among evils, e.g., had to decide whether to kill an aggressor or let many innocents die; and even if she chose the lesser evil she still had to impose an evil on someone, e.g., had to kill the aggressor. This goes against our natural empathy and moral training.

This would explain why moral fatigue can overwhelm even people engaged in prima facie purely constructive activities. Imagine there is food shortage from natural disaster and you must decide to whom to give rations. Naturally you feed the hungriest. But this means you must inflict a period of extreme hunger on the hungry-but-not-hungriest. That is to inflict an evil, one, again, that will go against your empathy and early training. And we can see how this might be exhausting – morally exhausting.

**Part 3. On the Possibility of Preventing and Treating Moral Injury Guilt With Emotion-Numbing Drugs**

Soon I want to moot whether it can be morally appropriate to prevent or treat moral injury with drugs. But first, drugs are likely to be of limited efficacy as vaccination or treatment. For moral injury results of an assault on one’s concept of one’s self, of others, and of the world, one experienced by all of one’s senses, and processed and up-taken by one’s whole being, including all of one’s capacities for cognitive processing. Moral judgements are of the whole self, made with all of one’s faculties, and integrating all the aspects of one’s self. Moral injuries are violations of the norms by which one lives and with which one navigates the social world. They are thus induced by experiences leading to emotions and cognitions, thence to judgements. Meanwhile, drugs can affect only one small part of the whole system that is a person – her immediate emotional response to an event, for instance, or the intensity of that response, or the emotional tone of her event memory of it, but not her whole body memory of it. One’s moral judgements are informed by so many things that any given judgment is over-determined by many inputs to and systems of the self, and so unlikely to be able to be changed or prevented by something that operates only on some small aspect of one’s self. Thus moral injury is more likely to be successfully prevented or treated by processes that involve the whole self, and that are therefore likely to result in a modification of the whole self, including one’s self as a being embedded in a social community – processes like talk therapy, discussion with friends, ceremonies of re-acceptance by communities, talking things through with people who have had similar experiences, having occasion to notice that one’s life is able to continue with some normalcy even after such experiences, occasions for deep moral reflection with someone of moral neutrality, training in the mindful experiencing and acceptance of feelings like guilt, and so on.

Interestingly, things effective as treatments may not work in advance as vaccinations. For example, we know that the self-inflicted moral injury of perpetrating a justified or accidental killing can be healed by loving reception back into one’s community, something the ancient Greeks practiced.[[8]](#footnote-8) Mightn’t it then be possible to “vaccinate” a soldier against such injury by loving him in advance, making him feel loved and accepted even in anticipation of the horrible things he’ll then have to do?

Unlikely. Love can heal, but it can’t prevent self-perpetrated moral injury, because anyone to whom the “cure in advance” is administered will in effect be socialized into a blooming, blossoming love of and acceptance of humanity, a love that would be brutalized by having to kill.[[9]](#footnote-9) Thus one would be left with no soldiers since those vaccinated would be unwilling to serve. Or one will be left with soldiers who, while willing to kill, perhaps from love of their own citizens and conviction that the war’s cause is good and just, will be even more damaged by the killing they must do in war.

Drugs too are less likely to work as treatment than as vaccination. For while drugs can usefully numb emotions before these contribute to laying down intense memories of the events that will later be remembered in a self-condemning light, the judgments can then affect a person’s behavior in spite of the numbing by drugs of the emotions associated with the recall of these events. The events are already remembered as horrible, the judgment of one’s self already made. And now one will have the further disorientation of not feeling strong emotion on recalling something for which one strongly self-condemns.

 A second reason drugs are likely to be unsatisfactory in prophylaxis or treatment of moral injury is that the signal emitted by the moral character of an event -- e.g., whether the event involves a moral or immoral action -- is able to overcome enormous amounts of noise in the system/person receiving the signal, including such noise as the numbing of emotionality by drugs. Someone who can’t feel moral revulsion at some horrible action may still be able to associate the action with other actions she knows to be wrong, and so be able to judge it wrong in the moment. Indeed, her ability to deal with the event may be impaired precisely by the dissonance of her judgment with her emotionality in the moment. For in addition to judging herself harshly for the action she cognitively knows to be morally wrong, she may also judge herself morally faulty for lacking morally required feelings about the event.[[10]](#footnote-10)

 Related to this is the operation of the aforementioned fast and slow systems in forming moral judgment.[[11]](#footnote-11) Maybe drugs can numb the emotional processing of a given event, thus preventing the fast system’s revulsion at the prospective act and so permitting a soldier to do the act. But her slow system will still be processing the act and months later may conclude that the act was morally unforgivable, at which point the soldier may face impulses to suicide.

 These considerations amount to the observation that the kind of moral injury which is extreme guilt even for justified or excused actions is judgment-mediated – it occurs by one’s judging oneself suicide-deserving. And since one’s feelings and moods are only part of what contributes to one’s moral judgements of one’s self, their chemical manipulation is unlikely to completely prevent or cure moral injury. Rather, the ideal vaccination and therapy would be a vaccinating or therapizing of one’s judgment; and this is characteristically a discursive undertaking, one that involves arguments, narratives, discussions with others who form part of one’s moral community, and so on.

 On the other hand, the feelings of grief and guilt experienced by soldiers can be overwhelming, in part because the events about which soldiers feel these things are typically highly emotionally stressing, and so accompanied by intense emotions. This, as we know, is how the brain decides of which things to retain the most detailed, persistent and emotionally valenced memories. And drugs given before the event can attenuate the emotions that would be felt at the time of the formation of the memory of morally significant actions and events, while drugs given after can lessen the emotional intensity of the experience of the activation of such memories. So to the degree that strong emotion drives someone to suicide, such drugs might be of help. Note, however, that lots of people have strong feelings but don’t kill themselves. They can accept their emotions and process what they mean – hence the method and power of mindfulness techniques in dealing with strong memories and unpleasant feelings. So it isn’t purely the intensity of emotions like guilt that leads to suicide, but also how they are experienced, processed and contextualized.[[12]](#footnote-12) Meanwhile, people with lessened affect can likewise be suicide risks – reduced affect is a symptom of depression, which can lead to suicide. So reducing emotionality won’t necessarily save someone from suicide either.

Still, drugs may have some efficacy and might sometimes work better than nothing. In fact, there is a specific kind of moral mistake for which they might be compensatory, a mistake related to one known in the literature on weakness of will and procrastination. As George Ainslie has observed, people will often opt for short-term small gains over larger longer-term large gains – they’ll choose two dollars given to them right now over ten dollars to be given in a month. The explanation is that the short-term gains look larger to us because of their temporal proximity, so we mis-judge them as being better than larger long-term gains, much as a short building seen close up can look taller than objectively taller buildings that are farther away.[[13]](#footnote-13) The explanation for this tendency, in turn, is that we evolved in environments where long-term gains couldn’t be relied on. Much of rational management of one’s own life decisions involves trying to compensate for this bias in a world better structured to fulfill promises of long-term gain. Relatedly, emotionally intense factors weigh more in our judgements about what to do or about how to morally judge ourselves than do emotionally mild factors. This again makes sense in the evolutionary context of a simple, socially small, short-term world. But in a world of more complex situations, this tendency can be inappropriately activated when artificial factors have inflated the felt emotional significance of an event. So, for example, we might know cognitively that killing one aggressor to save many innocent people is a good and right thing to do, something we should not condemn ourselves for. But if the killing occurs in an environment likely to elevate our emotional response – an environment of chaos, in a desperate moment riven with fear, and perhaps too with empathy conflicting us – this killing is likely to become emotionally valenced out of proportion to its real moral significance. Thus one can’t experience the morally positive significance of the lives saved because it is overwhelmed by the artificially emphasized negative significance of the taking of the life that had to be sacrificed. This excessive emotional saliencing is something drugs mihgt help moderate, both before, during and after such events. So we must explore whether it can be morally appropriate to use them to prevent or treat moral injury.

**Part 4. On the Ethics of Treating Moral Injury Guilt with Emotion-Numbing Drugs**

So: suppose that there is some killing that justice requires. Suppose some of the people who do the killing will sustain damage by this in the form of guilt they can’t live with. Would there be anything wrong with protecting them against unlivable guilt with sound moral suasion? Arguably not. With treating them with talk therapy and moral suasion after they sustain such an injury? Again, arguably not.

What about with drugs that reduce the emotional intensity with which horrifying experiences are felt? Since such emotions are part of what make memories of events so intense, and so memories of the horror of killing someone so unbearable, these drugs may help prevent unbearable guilt. Would it be OK to administer such drugs before soldiers have to engage in just killing? Here, many will protest.

But why? After all, I doubt anyone would object if we only sent in soldiers whom we knew in advance would be resilient in these kinds of situations, soldiers morally clear-headed and able to live with what must be done. So what’s the difference if we instead take someone who wouldn’t be like that and convert him using pharmacology?

Perhaps the worry is that we wouldn’t really be converting the soldier into a morally sound person, but into someone morally damaged; for drugs alone can’t create a morally balanced individual. But while the principle here may be true – drugs don’t make persons moral – its application here may be misguided. For all we’re talking about is administering a chemical that may inhibit impulses to suicide. We’re not pretending to thereby create a morally perfect soldier, only one less likely to kill himself.

Moreover, surely we wouldn’t require that a soldier who is not presently psychologically suffering about what he’s done be made to so suffer. True, if we think he ought to feel some level of guilt, we might want to verbally shame him into it. But it would be monstrous to insist that any soldier not sufficiently traumatized by what he’s done be given drugs that would cause extreme anxiety and induce suicidal guilt. For that matter, it would be monstrous to talk the solider into feeling suicidal guilt. Likewise, wouldn’t it be monstrous to give a soldier who is about to go into battle drugs that would worsen his emotional experience to the point that he would be at risk of suicide?

One argument against using drugs is that it is supposedly better that the people who do the just killing feel terrible about it for a while, then come to peace about it. We think this is a morally good story arc for a person’s experience. A person who goes through this process is morally better than someone who commits these acts and is immediately untroubled by them, and better than someone who simply can’t get over them, becoming suicidal. The first, person lacks appreciation for the magnitude of what’s happened and his role in it, while the second is taking on far too much responsibility for the event and failing to see his actions in proper context, one somewhat justifying or exculpatory of them.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Two points on this. First, even if we thought it better to be the sort of person who would initially feel bad and then come to peace, we might not refuse to send someone more likely immediately self-forgiving into battle. So even if we thought that in an ideal world a person would have a period of guilt after a killing, we might still think it better to give a drug that will prevent suicidal guilt rather than take the risk of sending someone into battle without the drug.

Second, the claim that it is morally better to first be plagued by guilt and then to come to peace can be objected to on the basis that it is merely making a virtue of necessity. Analogously, one might say this of that theodicy which holds that God can exist in spite of evil because his allowing evil is an occasion for the manifestation of such human virtues as courage, fortitude and self-sacrifice. These are virtues only because the world is evil. A better world would not require them. So the fact that the world requires them is just all the more proof that there is no God. Likewise for a person first feeling guilty and then getting over it: we are tempted to say that it is virtuous of a person to be plagued, at least for a while, with a troubling sense of moral responsibility for these actions, then work through these feelings and eventually come to state of grace and peace about it. But we may have come to think this a good thing only because we think it is something most of us could not help but go through in the situation – given our natures and our moral training the only way we could cope with what we’d had to do would be by a long period of troubled reflection. But that is compatible with a better world being one in which a pill saves a soldier from the middle period of guilt. After all, we are assuming that the killing he engages in is righteous. Therefore, guilt is inappropriate. For the soldier didn’t do anything wrong. He only did something that in other circumstances would have been wrong. Sadness would be appropriate, perhaps, sadness that something like this had to be done. But not guilt. And even if sadness is appropriate, surely not crippling, suicide-inducing sadness.

But we might think that this period of guilt is important for making sure that the soldier sorts out the significance of what he’s done, searches to see if there is something he really ought to feel badly about, or that instead should exonerate or excuse him, and so on. We want soldiers to be morally reflective about what they do before, during and after.

The key thought in this idea is a good one: all other things equal it is good to be morally mindful. But here, by hypothesis the morals of the situation have already been sorted out, revisiting them would be otiose, and the revisiting of them by a fragile mind could well result in a baseless suicide.

Another proposed justification for the period of guilt is that if we numb soldiers with drugs we won’t be able to tell whether our pretext for war is in fact insufficient given the horror of the killing required for it – we need people to experience the horror so that we can measure that cost against the benefits sought in the war. To this several replies: first, in the cases I’m concerned with we’ve already decided that the war is just. And even if we want to keep an open mind about this, would that require us to send all our soldiers into battle un-numbed? Couldn’t we numb most of them to save their consciences and then use a smaller few as our moral antennae? We’d monitor the emotions of the non-drugged soldiers to see whether what our soldiers are required to do in general is just too awful -- so awful that it would be better simply not to continue the war over whatever was the issue that got us into it.

It might be replied that what would make the war too awful is that many soldiers would have to do emotionally unbearable things, so sending in just a few isn’t giving us accurate moral data. Fine, then send in a lot of soldiers who are not numbed by drugs. But surely you don’t need to send in all of them without numbing any of them? Or better still, send in un-numbed a small number of soldiers that constitute a representative sample of different kinds of people, then generalize from whatever their experiences are to what it would be like for vast numbers of soldiers to have these experiences, meanwhile sparing the majority from suicide-inducing guilt.

Further, if part of the horror of war that we want to keep track of in deciding whether to continue the war is constituted by the guilt soldiers might feel for their actions, a guilt we think would be baseless, and if we can prevent it with drugs, then we can prevent that part of the horror we fear, which means that we can eliminate that objection to proceeding with an otherwise just war.

Another argument for drugs is that what makes an action right or wrong isn’t just that people would find it emotionally unpleasant to do the action. It’s something else more calculable in the abstract, something like total amount of human suffering inflicted or saved, empathy apart. Or maybe it is the fulfilling of contracts, or the obeying of absolute moral principles, or the respecting of the rights of as many people as possible. So we don’t need to send people into battle with their emotionality left active to do the moral research necessary to decide the morality of the war.

Next, we might think that if we numb people they’ll kill too easily -- better that we have extremely reluctant killers. But again, we are talking about situations where we’ve already decided who must be killed; and the last thing we want here is reluctant killers. We want killers who will get the job done. Why make them go through the guilt?

It might be replied that it’s always at least in part up for grabs whether there ought to be a killing at all, and this is partly to be decided by the emotional responses of the prospective killer. But this is at least sometimes false. And anyway, it leaves it too relative whether a killing is wrong. For surely it’s either wrong or it’s not. If you find it too horrible to do and I don’t, surely it is not the mere fact of either of our attitudes that decides the matter. The matter should be decided by which of our respective attitudes is morally justified. And this cannot without circularity be decided by our emotions, since it is precisely the rightness of our conflicting emotions about this that morality must adjudicate. (What may be decided by our respective emotional responses is not whether the deed should be done, but who should do it. If you find the idea of doing it so horrible that you’d be traumatized into suicide by doing it, while I would not, then it is morally better that I do it, thus sparing a tender heart from becoming a moral casualty.)

No, what we want is not necessarily reluctant killers, nor killers who will have extreme remorse. Rather, we want killers whose killing is precisely under the control of morality, killers who will kill all and only those morally required to be killed. The theory that soldiers must be controlled by their emotions in order to be morally discerning is just a false theory of what that sort of control morality requires and is facilitated by.

Yet some may think that there could be no morality if there were no emotions; so if soldiers are to make good moral decisions they must be under the control of un-numbed emotions. But it is false that there could be no morality without emotions. It is enough that there be needs, interests or preferences, things the serving or frustrating of which needn’t be accompanied by emotions in order to be right or wrong. So we don’t necessarily require un-numbed emotions in order to track right and wrong here. It is true that emotions typically accompany these things and in normal life often guide us about our duties. But we are talking now about non-normal times, ones where, for our own moral health it is perhaps better that we follow other cues to the moral correctness of our actions, e.g., that our betters have ordered these actions.

It might be argued that soldiers need their emotions in order to decide what to do in borderline cases where rules of engagement aren’t fully determinate. This is not a terrible argument, but I’m not sure it’s decisive. After all, we can make rules of engagement as precise as we like.

And anyway, leaving soldiers emotional in battle has the downside that all their emotions will be at risk of being in play, including ones like anger that tend to induce such wrongs as revenge killings.

Well, what if we could control such problematic emotions as anger with drugs? Then maybe we should leave certain other emotions, like those associated with conscience and guilt, unregulated by drugs, for the moral accuracy in killing that this will induce. I admit that this possibility is worth more attention. But it may be premised on the conceptual mistake, that of thinking these sorts of emotions can be disentangled from emotionality generally and thus precisely filtered, while leaving other emotions, or the potential for them, intact. A soldier might need some capacity for anger, for example, in order to experience such emotions as fear, or such mental states as concentration, since anger may be in part either a trigger to, constituent of, or adaptive response to, dangerous situations. The mistake is akin to thinking we could make a person unable to taste Chinese food, say, while still leaving them able to taste Hungarian food. The problem is that all food tastes are a combination of sweet, sour, salty and umami, so removing the ability to have one of these basic sensations would be the same as removing the ability to taste not only Chinese food, but also Hungarian. Likewise all emotions may be composed of elements from a basic emotional palette. So you can’t leave a person able to experience a constructive anger if you rob them of the ability to feel a destructive anger, for example.

On to another argument against using emotion-numbing drugs: some people think drugs are problematic because they make you less sensitive to the facts. But we may reply that those who need them are precisely those who are too sensitive to the facts. And of course we don’t want our soldiers to be too timid, for then they are a danger to other soldiers and no help in advancing our policy objectives.

Another, related argument for not using emotion-numbing drugs vaccinatively is that the reason people refrain from doing bad things is the anticipation of feeling guilty. And if one is given drugs one knows will ensure one won’t feel such guilt, drugs that will even dull the budding intimation of it at the moment one is contemplating a kill, won’t one lose all motivation to refrain from doing bad things?

Two replies to this: first, fear of guilt, and budding intimation of guilt are not the only or main ways we decide whether an action is moral. Second, we’re talking about preventing inappropriately intense and inappropriately occasioned guilt – unmanageably strong guilt over actions justified or excused. And since such guilt is morally inappropriate, preventing it won’t result in immoral conduct.

We’ve been seeing that there are arguments (of varying persuasiveness) for not numbing troops with drugs before and during battle because they’ll need their emotions to decide right from wrong in combat. But after, when they may have made bad decisions and have massive guilt about them, wouldn’t it be good to then give them drugs? Especially after all contributions from their experiences have been made to moral progress, e.g., they’ve been debriefed and we’ve learned our lessons about the morality of this war from their experiences.

Another consideration against using drugs to numb soldiers’ emotions about killing is that this may make them into flawed parents unable to appreciate how bad killing is, and so unable to transmit this knowledge to their children. Ironically, this attempt to prevent a form of PTSI (Post-Traumatic Stress Injury) might perpetuate a trauma onto the next generation by inducing failures of moral education.[[15]](#footnote-15)

This is certainly a concern, but arguably it can be handled by some of the observations made earlier. E.g., the drugs are supposed to prevent someone from having an over-reaction to the horror of killing; and failing to prevent that in someone might likewise impair their ability to give moral education as a parent – they might wind up making their children cripplingly phobic about even morally necessary killing.

I’ve been assuming that the killing engaged in by someone who sustains a moral injury by being the perpetrator of an action she finds problematic is really a morally all things considered right killing. But the killings in war can range from being morally required killings (one aggressor had to be killed to save many innocent people), morally permitted killings (“it was a fire-fight and it was him or me”), excused killings (“it was an accident, I got surprised, I didn’t know anyone was there”), understandable killings (“I was exhausted, they’d just killed my Captain and my best friend, and I totally lost it”), to monstrous killings (“I’ve just always wanted to know what it would feel like to kill a totally innocent person”). I’ve assumed that the moral injuries at issue are from soldiers perpetrating killings either morally required, permitted or excused. But suppose that in the heat of the moment a soldier does something that is none of those things but instead is only an understandable killing – one that shouldn’t have happened, for which there is no excuse, which should be discouraged, but which we can imagine performing in similar circumstances. Suppose we are inclined to think that while the soldier does not deserve the death penalty he ought to have some fairly extreme degree of guilt. Suppose further that it is known that many soldiers in this situation will have suicide-inducing levels of guilt. Again, wouldn’t it be OK to save them from this by preparing them in advance with moral suasion? (We might say to them: “things are going to get dicey over there. You may get confused, or angry, and this may lead you to do something horrible, either by reflex, or by inadvertence or by having the worst part of your nature activated. And you should probably feel bad for a while about these things if you do them. But then you must forgive yourself and move on with your life. Because war is hell, and a lot of what you will do over there won’t be your fault. You’ll just have been the guy who was there in that situation in that moment. And crazy things happen in the fog of war.) But if moral suasion would be OK, then, again, why not drugs? And now we will reprise the same arguments.

Meanwhile, if we think a soldier has done something horrible for which there is neither justification nor excuse, something so monstrous that we can’t imagine doing it ourselves, then we think he’s wittingly done wrong, and arguably guilt, perhaps even suicidal guilt, is appropriate. So if he is experiencing suicidal guilt, we should not think of him has having a moral injury. Rather, he is experiencing a fitting punishment. Or maybe his punishment is a moral injury – he is punished by means of being morally injured, in this case, by his own conscience. This may mean that sometimes there are more important things than the alleviation of moral injury -- sometimes being a victim of moral injury is required by justice.

Either way we in turn might be obliged to have compassion for the soldier – he is a human who is suffering after all.[[16]](#footnote-16) So we might want to alleviate his suffering by helping him through his guilt, e.g., by engaging in rituals of penance and forgiveness like those that the Catholic church has perfected, or convicting him of a crime, having him do his time, and then enabling his reinsertion into our community. But if this is a good argument, then, again, why not do it with drugs, especially if that’s the only thing that would work in a given case? Is it that we think he deserves some level of suffering, just not suicidal levels? Fine, then give him drugs that will let him get to that point but no further.

Before leaving this issue, I should moot a thought that may have occurred to the more unforgivingly judgmental among us, and that must certainly occur to anyone in the psychological and psychiatric helping professions, namely, that, as the existential psychiatrist Rollo May and others have suggested, some people may be such that it would be entirely appropriate for them to commit suicide – either as a morally defensible choice on the ground that they deserve this[[17]](#footnote-17), or on the ground that they can’t otherwise get over the guilt so that this is the less painful alternative; existence has become unbearable. Here, perhaps there should be no talk of healing their moral injury. Or perhaps we should think of suicide as the means by which they are “healed”.

A final observation about using emotion numbing drugs to prevent psychological trauma. We’ve so far considered their use only on soldiers. But suppose drugs can lessen the negative psychological effects of moral injury. Suppose we expect the enemy civilian population to experience a great deal of moral injury from certain actions we think militarily justifiable: should we dispense (maybe by air-drop) tons of these drugs to them before, during and after military engagements to lessen the impacts of the problematic experiences these people will have? Something for discussion another time.

Now a brief remark about the form of moral injury that commanders and politicians may face, namely, moral fatigue. Just as soldiers in battle might be spared the moral injury of suicide-inducing guilt by being given emotion-numbing drugs, so perhaps the guilt of commanders, politicians, even autonomous weapons programmers, can be attenuated by ensuring that these people are not allowed the proximity to the killing and the information about the reality of what it involves that would be required to induce guilt in them. Distance from the facts might serve the same morally salutary role as numbing by drugs.

Of course, there will then be the same arguments as were made against numbing soldiers – that we need politicians and commanders and programmers to be emotionally raw – and so exposed the daily horrors of killing -- to serve as moral antennae about the rightness of the war, we need them to be reluctant killers, and we think it more virtuous that a warrior who causes harm to first have great guilt about this and then get over it.

But won’t all the replies I made to those objections equally apply here? Maybe not. For here we are at the level of command and control, and if emotions don’t figure here, arguably they never will.

On the other hand, while maybe we need some commanders and controllers to have full emotional experience, do we need this of all of them? Maybe some could be spared by the method of distancing from the morally exhausting facts.

**Part 5. PTSD Weaponized: The Military Exploitation of Asymmetrical Conceptions of Harm**[[18]](#footnote-18)

Next, a topic many will find distasteful, but it must be discussed, namely, the idea of using moral injury as a weapon. It must be discussed because moral injury is being used as a weapon against us by terrorists. Indeed, it is used in all wars, by all sides including ours, and we might as well acknowledge it, thence to look closely at it and understand better its nature, its strategic advantages and disadvantages, the morality of its deployment, the morally justified responses to it, and the strategic counters to it. I can only make the barest beginnings on all of this here.

Since moral injury is an injury, it can be weaponized; but because of the special nature of moral injury, using it as a weapon is recommended in some circumstances over other weapons. To see why, we must look more closely at the nature of moral injury or harm.

Some things seem to be harms only because they are thought to be harms – defecating on the bible of some cult’s religion, for example. Their imagined god does not exist, the book has significance only on the assumption of the truth of a fiction, no real supernatural creature is insulted by this act, and so on. The harm depends entirely on someone believing in a myth, a myth part of which is that it is bad to defecate on its central text. (If you object that your religion is true, your bible, God’s word, then imagine all of this said of some other religion you think gets it all wrong.) This myth may be central to the moral outlook of a people, so desecrating the symbols of this myth may constitute a moral harm to them. Meanwhile, other things are harms, period. Having your arm hacked off, for example. This is a harm even where it is the lesser of evils, as in hacking off your own arm to escape a trap where the alternative is death.

The nature of the former sort of harm makes interesting possibilities for warfighters. For it is a truism about warfighting that, while the enemy is harmed, so is the person doing the harming. We see the harms to perpetrators expressed in the symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Injury, e.g., in guilt self-therapized by suicide. But harm that is merely perception dependent in the way just described has three features that may morally recommend it to warfighting precisely because it means less harm to the perpetrator.

First, there is an important sense in which such so-called harms aren’t really harms; they are just perceived by their victim as such. Or at any rate these things are lesser harms in any absolute or objective sense, and always lesser such harms than they are perceived to be by their victims. (We are all familiar with this kind of reasoning. We will say in defense of progressive taxation, for example, that the millionaire won’t miss the extra 2%; and if he does, he shouldn’t, for it’s not a real harm to him.)

Second, to the degree that a merely perceived harm is a harm, and to the degree that its being perceived as a harm depends on the person being harmed having attitudes that constitute factual mistakes – believing in a god that does not in fact exist, believing that some desecrating act is horrible when really it’s trivial – then the harm can be alleviated simply by administering an emancipating education. And that additionally is both an intrinsic good and a thing likely to have beneficial consequences to the recipient even beyond that of removing the sting of what was originally received as a harm.

Finally, if the person who inflicts this so-called harm doesn’t have the attitudes required to interpret it as harm, or at least not as the sort of harm it is perceived as being by its victim, and so sees it as not really a harm or as a lesser harm, she will be less likely to be traumatized by inflicting it. The only real harm occurring is the disrespecting of someone’s superstitious attitudes. And if this is a harm it is closer on the spectrum of harms to violating a principle of etiquette – the principle that it is rude to disrespect a person’s deeply held views – rather than to something on the other end of that spectrum, e.g., torture by electric shock, or maiming or killing.

These features make moral harm an ideal candidate for humane weaponization. Indeed, moral harm has been used in warfare for as long as there has been warfighting. It is the fundamental method of terrorism, for example. Killing a few civilians has an effect far beyond that of killing a few or even thousands of soldiers, because we in our moral system find it morally outrageous to kill unarmed people not engaged in aggression. Likewise, killing people by beheading; or killing innocent children. All of these actions have the effect of being morally disorienting and dislocating, and when they work, they evoke reactions like, “these people are crazy, there’s nothing they won’t do, just give them what they want and hope to hell they’ll leave us alone.” Arguably the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was an act of moral warfare. It was a monumental devastation of a civilian population, one no doubt perceived as morally terrifying. Indeed, it morally shocked the world in ways still ramifying. But, at least according to Wig history, the shock of it ended the war and saved millions of lives, including Japanese lives.

But are these really more humane than standard warfighting techniques? Well, arguably it’s better to kill a few civilians to win a war than to kill thousands of soldiers – a soldier, after all, is just a civilian with a gun. The same for killing a few by beheading than killing a lot by bullets, or for killing a child to achieve the same outcome as by killing many adults. Or for spectacularly killing a million with an A-bomb now to save killing millions more later. Our moral sensibilities are outraged by killing civilians, children, etc. And this gives an enemy moral leverage against us, leverage they wouldn’t have if we saw these things in their true moral light. By the same token, our enemies can expect less moral injury guilt to themselves by inflicting these harms, since they can see them as lesser harms than the alternatives, and as such, perhaps ones justified by their causes.

Meanwhile, America has recently used moral injury as a war fighting technique more humane than alternatives. Think of the humiliations inflicted during interrogations at Abu Ghraib – vandalizing religious symbols, degrading captives in ways that didn’t leave them particularly physically harmed. What the Americans did in Abu Ghraib was shocking, but not by comparison to what Saddam had been doing before, and shocking in part precisely because it was Americans doing it. But much of what they did was moral warfare more than anything else. Arguably this was a perfect case of the asymmetrical conceptions of harm of which I spoke earlier: because of the moral outlook of the captives, they were able to be harmed enough by these degradations and humiliations that they were able to be coerced in militarily useful ways; but because the harms were largely belief-dependent, those inflicting them would be able to think of them as harms for which less guilt would be appropriate than serious physical torture. So the same military objectives are achieved in ways objectively less harmful to the captives, and with less risk of perpetrator moral injury.

Now to some objections to this line of thinking. First, isn’t at least some moral harm genuine harm? Yes. Anyone who has a true morality, one not premised in mistakes about the facts, is truly harmed if she is morally harmed. True moralities have the characteristic that the only way to harm someone who inhabits them is by doing something that is truly immoral. To harm someone who finds cruelty immoral, you have to behave cruelly. But to harm someone who believes it is a harm to depict Allah in a disrespectful picture, all you need do is something that in truth is utterly intrinsically harmless, namely, draw a silly picture. (Think of the homicidal outrage caused by the drawings of Allah in the magazine Charlie Hebdo. The killers felt grievously harmed. But they weren’t. They only thought they were.)

But isn’t even harming someone by contravening their falsely premised conception of harm nonetheless a harm? And can’t it be as bad as what I’m calling a real harm?

Unsurprisingly, the answer is, “it depends”. On the face of it, it isn’t much of a harm to a male to be made to stand naked before a female soldier, for example (Abu Ghraib). But if one is from a patriarchal culture premised in a fear of women and of women’s sexuality and sexual power, and organized around the ideal of male dominance, it will seem a much greater harm.

But will it seem to be a greater than, for example, torture with electricity? Here it’s not so clear what to say. On the one hand, apparently people can endure a lot of misery if they think it’s for a good moral cause. And if a misery is more endurable under some conditions, then perhaps this is because under those conditions it is, or is perceived as (and so again, is) less of a misery. So under some conditions, electrical torture might not seem like that big a deal -- not, for example, if you think it is in the service of your cause. Meanwhile, if you are just being gratuitously stripped for the fun of captors, and there’s nothing they particularly want from you other than to insult and demean you, well, maybe it would be better to be under torture with electricity while refusing to reveal important secrets – you’d have your dignity. So here perhaps we have someone who is experiencing being demeaned as a great harm.[[19]](#footnote-19)

On the other hand, in physical torture there’s the pain. While in the case of the patriarchal soldier being made to strip, since the harm is all in his head, surely this makes it objectively a lesser harm than some physical harm like electrical torture would be.

And all a person who is harmed by having their religious text abused would have to do to make this act not a harm is wake up to the truth that their God does not exist and their central text is a work of fiction. Generalizing, anyone injured merely by an offense to their subjective morality can be healed by their changing their mind about whether their morality is correct. (There is still the aspect of the harm that comes of realizing someone wants to harm you, even if they are going about it in a stupid way, or in a way that involves nothing more than exploiting some false belief you hold. Even objectively speaking, it is not nice to be meant ill. But that’s separate from the supposed harm of having one’s sacred text desecrated. Moreover, think of how our victim here would feel once disabused of his factually errant beliefs, once he realizes that his captors proceeded under the scruple that they did not want to inflict actual, serious physical harms, and so on.) All such people have to do in order not to be harmed is change their opinion about a moral matter. But to not be harmed by electrical shocks they would have to have an entirely different physical structure.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Sometimes it is better to commit one act of supposedly profound moral harm in order to deter many conventional harms. E.g., let’s say that conventional warfare targets soldiers, while moral-injury-fought warfare targets civilians, especially children. Arguably if you could end a war by threatening or killing a small number of children, something that would be seen as forbiddingly horrific, you should do that if the alternative is further conventional warfare that will result in the deaths of vastly more civilians and adults. Put another way, terrorist warfare can be more ethical warfare under some conditions.

This must make us wonder whether we have our moral equations right. Is the life of a child really more important than the life of a soldier in her mid-20s, or than the life of several such soldiers? Is killing a child really that much more outrageous?

That we are challenged to ask these questions as we confront terrorist techniques of warfare suggests a surprising defense against such warfare, one provided not by shields, guns or bombs, but by philosophy. For it is philosophy which can coolly tell us that some things which outrage, dangerously provoke and so weaken us in these contexts really do not amount to the harms we think they do. The moral shocks they inflict upon us are really a kind of illusion. I do not deny that it is immoral to hurt a child. But I do think we should question whether that is worse than killing hundreds of soldiers. And where whether we have been harmed to a certain degree depends on whether we think we have been harmed to that degree, philosophical reflection may blunt the force of the injury.

1. I began thinking about this topic after hearing someone I met at one of these conferences say they were “morally exhausted”; and after hearing other stories of what could only be described as moral frustration and moral despair. I felt instantly that I knew intuitively what these people were talking about, but I have found the concepts surprisingly difficult to analyze philosophically. Hence this paper. For helpful discussion I thank some people best left unnamed, as well as L, W, K, Greg Scherkosky and Richmond Campbell. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. On the extent to which post-traumatic stress injuries are owed to or better seen as a collection of, some of these factors, see Stephen N. Xenakis, “Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Beyond Best Practices”, Psychoanalytic Psychology, vol. 31 (2013), pp. 236-44; and Stephen N. Xenakis, ﻿“The Role and Responsibilities of Psychiatry in 21st Century Warfare”, J. Am. Acad. Psychiatry Law, vol. 42 (2014), pp. 504-08. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. On the relation between PTSD and the availability of disability pay, see Christopher Frueh et al., “Disability Compensation Seeking Among Veterans Evaluated for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder”, Psychiatric Services, vol. 54 (2003), pp. 84–91, http://ps.psychiatryonline.org/doi/10.1176/appi.ps.54.1.84. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Again, see Xenakis (2013) and Xenakis (2014). It is quite apparent that Xenakis therefore sees psychiatry itself as necessarily a politically implicated and properly politically involved profession in the treatment of post-traumatic stress injury. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Thanks to L for this thought. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Paul Thagard, “I Feel Your Pain: Mirror Neurons, Empathy, and Moral Motivation”, Journal of Cognitive Science 8 (2007), pp. 109-136. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Daniel Kahneman, Thinking, Fast and Slow (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Łukasz Kamienski, “Helping the Postmodern Ajax: Is Managing Combat Trauma Through Pharmacology a Faustian Bargain?” Armed Forces & Society, Vol. 39 (2012), pp. 395–414, http://afs.sagepub.com/content/39/3/395.short. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Thanks to L for this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. On the importance of being able to have feelings of guilt in order to recovery from moral injury, and of being able to see one’s feelings of guilt as evidence that one is still a decent person, see Nancy Sherman, “Recovering Lost Goodness: Shame, Guilt, and Self-Empathy”, Psychoanalytic Psychology, vol. 31 (2014), pp 217-35; Elisa A. Hurley, “Combat Trauma and the Moral Risks of Memory Manipulating Drugs”, Journal of Applied Philosophy, vol. 27 (2010), pp. 221-245 (2010), <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1468-5930.2010.00492.x/abstract>. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See Kahneman (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Thanks to K and L for discussion of these points. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Geroge Ainslie, Breakdown of Will (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. For this argument, see Elisa A. Hurley, “Combat Trauma and the Moral Risks of Memory Manipulating Drugs”, 27 Journal of Applied Philosophy 221-245 (2010), http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1468-5930.2010.00492.x/abstract. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Thanks to W for this worry. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Martha Nussbaum, “Equity and Mercy”, Philosophy and Public Affairs 83 (1993), pp. 83-125, especially pp. 83-92. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. My own view is that no one deserves to die by suicide no matter how horrible their crime; and that a correct ethic would be a livable ethic, one ready to forgive, to work through guilt rather than proceed to shame. This might be contested. Indeed, apparently it is contested by those who sentence themselves to suicide. I would argue however that, if you had a good heart and nonetheless found yourself in a difficult moral dilemma, e.g., killing a child who has a grenade rather than allow the child to blow up your troop, your dilemma cannot rightly be constructed as an impossible one where, no matter what you do, you do wrong and so should kill yourself. Rather, no matter what you do here, you did the best you could and you should assume a right to live. That is, morality should err on the side of being forgiving. The ancient Greek idea that some lives are such that the person living them is innocently doomed to fail a moral dilemma has to rest on a moral mistake. The mistake is forgetting that, as Immanuel Kant taught us, ought implies can – that it can only be true that you ought to have done no harm if you could have done no harm. And in these dilemmas, you harming someone is unavoidable. The only question is who you will harm, not whether to harm. So you cannot be rightly morally condemned for this. No purpose is served holding people to such a standard, because it can make no difference to their behavior, only to their level of suffering for it. Thanks to L for discussion on this, especially as the premise of psychotherapy. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Thanks to Greg Scherkosky for the term, “Asymmetrical Conceptions of Harm”. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Thanks to L for discussion on this. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Still, in warfare sometimes it is often best to commit sociology. And sociology will tell us that for some cultures, it is worse to degrade a man than to kill him. So if you want to bring about a peace with his culture, arguably it’s important to respect the dignity of his soldiers and fight them with conventional lethal techniques, even if in some objective sense it would be worse to kill their soldiers than to humiliate them. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)