

Virtue and the Moral Life
*Theological and
Philosophical Perspectives*

Edited by William Werpehowski
and Kathryn Getek Soltis

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Chapter Four

Moral Grief and Reflective Virtue

Mark A. Wilson

As service members have returned home from the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and in the wake of a surging number of military suicides and incidents of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), the concept of moral injury has gained currency as a way to interpret the experience of warriors. Popularized by recent work in psychiatry as well as philosophy, the term “moral injury” is meant to capture the experience of many combat veterans who suffer from guilt, shame, and regret as a result of the moral compromises demanded by war. Not uncommonly, the experience of moral injury effects a fissure in the pre-war and post-war sense of character and self and creates obstacles to the veteran’s reintegration into civil society.

My aim in this chapter is to augment and deepen our understanding of moral injury by developing a concept that I will call moral grief. Moral grief, as I will present it, reflects a virtuous response to those events that generate moral injury and points the way to cooperative virtues that might aid in our understanding of ethical tragedy. I want to explore the burdens of conscience that moral tragedy engenders and what these burdens might mean for a virtuous life. More specifically, I want to examine the notion of moral injury with an eye toward particular virtues that are frequently revealed by and demanded of the returning warrior. Combat veterans, whose struggle with moral grief was neither invited nor welcomed, nonetheless display an important type of excellence. As I hope to make clear, we are all to greater and lesser extents called upon to develop these virtues, and while returning warriors present exacting and acute instances of these habits of mind, in doing so they highlight the virtues that are essential to any pursuit of a life well-lived. My discussion, then, is less focused on how we might counsel veterans than how veterans teach us through their negotiation of tragedy.

My discussion will proceed in three stages. First, I will provide an overview of the concept of moral injury as it has developed in recent clinical literature as well as in earlier philosophical literature. My intention is to reveal the essential features of moral injury and, through the use of examples, make tangible the experience of many combat veterans. I also hope to make salient the fact that the veteran's moral injury is not different in kind (though often in degree) from the experience that all moral agents have. In the second stage, I will introduce the concept of moral grief as distinct from moral injury. Contrasted with the passivity implied by moral injury, moral grief entails an active response to tragedy and is an important capacity for a well-formed character. I will locate the basis for a virtue of moral grief in both Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, though as we will see, philosophers such as Bernard Williams and Margaret Urban Walker also intimate the concept. Moral grief as I envision it stands as a *via media* between therapeutic approaches that treat moral injury as a problem to be solved, and redemption narratives that risk glorifying the suffering of combat veterans. Third and finally, I will attempt to identify three cooperative virtues that structure moral grief. These reflexive virtues, as I refer to them—dispositions the *telos* of which is self-understanding and self-knowledge—give shape to moral grief as an apposite response to tragedy. Though there are a great many virtues that we might recognize in the warrior's grief—not least courage, patience, and fortitude—I will explore humility, availability, and fidelity, virtues that I believe form the basis for more conventional virtues such as courage. By the end, my hope is that we might in small measure better understand both the experience of combat veterans and the human experience generally, and perhaps gain modestly in our appreciation of the excellences required of finite agents in an imperfect world.

MORAL INJURY AND THE INVISIBLE WOUNDS OF WAR

Before turning to explore the concepts of moral injury, it is necessary to make two important provisions. First, the notions of moral injury and moral grief presented here are not meant to serve as or substitute for therapy directed at PTSD and brain injury. As it has developed in the current literature, moral injury addresses a phenomenon quite distinct from PTSD, as the latter is characterized by fear and hyper-arousal and the former by guilt-like feelings.¹ Second, moral injury, as I will examine it, applies to the sort of suffering that is reported by well-meaning individuals who did their best to abide by the laws of war and who nevertheless experience forms of guilt, shame, regret, and remorse over their actions or inactions in war. I am not, then, considering the moral psychology of war criminals or those who knowingly violated the rules of combat.

As a clinical term, "moral injury" is of relatively recent vintage, though as we shall see the basic phenomenon is described at least indirectly throughout Greek, Roman, and Christian writings. Indeed, the most influential contemporary articulation, from psychiatrist Jonathan Shay, is presented within an examination of Homeric literature. Shay's *Achilles in Vietnam* and *Odysseus in America* both explore the experience of combat trauma through the accounts of warfare in Greek epic, and it is within this context that Shay attempts to shed light on the hidden wounds of war, the psychological and moral injuries that can lead to a radical transformation of character.² In contrast to those who would claim that good character, once formed, possesses stability and constancy, Shay echoes the thinking of philosophers such as Bernard Williams and Martha Nussbaum in stressing the fragility of goodness and its susceptibility to corruption through misfortune.³ War, as Shay notes, "creates an abundance of 'moral (bad) luck' that cannot be completely prevented short of ending the human practice of war."⁴ Because of this, war presents the perpetual threat of moral injury.

For Shay, the damages to character that result from moral injury are exemplified by Achilles and Odysseus, both of whom experience a fall from grace, literally and figuratively, as a result of war. Shay interprets Homer's protagonists as suffering from a fractured sense of their moral selves, a moral brokenness brought about through the death of a loved comrade, the execution of unjust orders, and the witness of unspeakable suffering. The ordeals of Achilles and Odysseus are, on Shay's powerful telling, shown to correspond to the many testimonies he has recorded as a counselor to veterans of the Vietnam War.

Jonathan Shay focuses his analysis of moral injury on the organizational structure of the military and his definition of moral injury emphasizes the abuse of authority. Moral injury, he writes, "is present when (1) there has been a betrayal of what's right, (2) by someone who holds legitimate authority, (3) in a high-stakes situation."⁵ By contrast, recent work in clinical psychology has jettisoned the role of leadership and widened the scope of moral injury. Brett Litz and his colleagues, for example, have argued that the shame and guilt typical of moral injury may arise in a range of circumstances where individuals have compromised their deeply held moral commitments.⁶ On this account, moral injury "involves an act of transgression that creates dissonance and conflict because it violates assumptions and beliefs about right and wrong and personal goodness."⁷ From the perspective of *moral* psychology, however, even this expanded definition seems to unduly circumscribe the phenomena in question. The combat veteran who has without fault committed fratricide or who has, in accordance with the laws of war, unintentionally killed a noncombatant, may well have acted in accord with his stated moral beliefs. There is, in such cases, no dissonance between one's moral beliefs and one's actions. Though many veterans *do* suffer guilt from

clear violations of their moral commitments, many also suffer "merely" from participating in the quotidian events of combat.

Thus, while failures of leadership and breaches of moral code factor into many instances of moral injury, these definitions seem too narrow to cover the variety of moral wounds that can befall combatants. This is evidenced by the accounts many veterans give of their combat experience. A particularly salient description of moral injury is found in Tim O'Brien's semi-autobiographical work, *The Things They Carried*. In opening the novel, O'Brien suggests, with misleading simplicity, that war for the Vietnam veteran was a struggle against gravity. After providing an exhaustive inventory of the soldiers' war goods and their weights, he writes, "They carried all they could bear, and then some, including a silent awe for the terrible power of the things they carried."⁸ O'Brien unpacks the image of a soldier's struggle to "hump" freight into a metaphor for the psychological burdens that the warrior carries into and out of combat. In the course of the novel, O'Brien makes palpable the fact that the heaviest things soldiers carried were the memories of war, and the gravity against which they fought was of a moral kind. He explains that "They carried shameful memories. They carried the common secret of cowardice barely restrained, the instinct to run or freeze or hide, and in many respects this was the heaviest burden of all," adding "The bad stuff never stops happening: it lives in its own dimension, replaying itself over and over."⁹

At the heart of his account of war in *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien reveals that the deepest wounds of combat are often the scars to one's memory and conscience from the hiding, hoping, and not least killing that are the commonplace of warfare. War often damages one's sense of self and creates an injury that is all the worse for its invisibility. As a former army ranger and current counselor reports, "I've talked to soldiers that say, 'I'd much rather be an amputee than to be psychologically injured. At least when you looked at me, you could see what my problem was.'"¹⁰

The sorrow expressed by O'Brien is not contingent on misguided authority or perceived wrongdoing. Rather, the lamentation attaches to basic facts of warfare. There is killing and there is dying, there is blood-thirst and bloodshed, and there is a sense that one was not made for such this. "Here is the happening-truth," O'Brien confesses, "I was once a soldier. There were many bodies, real bodies with real faces, but I was young then and I was afraid to look. And now, twenty years later, I'm left with faceless responsibility and faceless grief."¹¹

It is best, it seems to me, to work with a capacious understanding of moral injury, one that captures the myriad ways in which combat veterans suffer from burdens of conscience. In her recent work, the philosopher Nancy Sherman has argued for an expansive view of moral injury that attempts to capture the variety of inner wounds experienced by combat veterans. Her ac-

count considers moral injury in terms of any event that elicits self-reproach and feelings of guilt.¹² In sympathy with Sherman's approach, I want to suggest that moral injury should be understood as a species of emotional and psychological pain that takes one's agency as its object and that arises from participation in tragic circumstances. That the object is one's agency and one's sense of participation indicates that individuals suffering moral injury take themselves to have *done* or *not done* something. That the participation is *tragic* implies that the events which generate moral injury involve adverse states of affairs that would be avoided in ideal conditions. Note that the emphasis here is shifted from violation of one's moral convictions to one's involvement in tragedy as such. Understood this way, moral injuries may be occasioned simply by being party to the gruesome realities of war, as suggested by O'Brien: "I want to tell you this: twenty years ago I watched a man die on a trail near the village of My Khe. I did not kill him. But I was present, you see, and my presence was guilt enough. I remember his face, which was not a pretty face, because his jaw was in his throat, and I remember feeling the burden of responsibility and grief. I blamed myself. And rightly so, because I was present."¹³ O'Brien's candid reflection suggests that one's presence alone may be taken as participation in tragedy.

If clumsy and at risk of being overly economical, this definition of moral injury has the benefit of capturing not only the types described by Shay, Litz, Sherman, and others, but also the general moral pain that we witness in narratives like O'Brien's. It also has the advantage of bridging the gap between the soldier's experience qua combatant and the common human experience. Though few of us may undergo the acute moral pain of the war veteran, all of us are in some degree haunted by our past actions and their effects in the world.

Conceived as a type of reflective suffering that attaches to an individual's sense of agency, moral injury as I've presented it bears a family resemblance to what Bernard Williams termed "agent-regret."¹⁴ I agree with Nancy Sherman that "regret" appears too benign a word for the depth of feeling involved with moral injury. However, while regret (as distinct from remorse, guilt, shame, and sorrow) is too narrow to capture the full canvass of emotions involved, Williams's account of agent-regret captures the constitutive features of moral injury.¹⁵ Surfacing from an encounter with bad moral luck, the defining thoughts of agent-regret are "What have I done?" and "Would that I could have done otherwise." The thoughts and corresponding emotional pain of agent-regret closely align with the experience reported by many combat veterans and underscores the degree to which one's very identity as a moral agent has become an object of scrutiny. It is not, Williams notes, simply a wish that things could be otherwise, a wish that anyone might have about the terrors of war. It is a deep desire that *my* agency, *my self*, could have been otherwise.¹⁶ Furthermore, and importantly, the actions upon which the con-

science focuses need not be deliberate. It is a fact of the human condition, Williams observes, "that in the story of one's life there is an authority exercised by what one has done, and not merely by what one has intentionally done."¹⁷ As Shay has stressed in his work, many combat veterans are tormented by the bad luck that is ubiquitous in war. These potentially traumatic events are not the result of moral crimes or misdoings, but rather being in the wrong place at the wrong time, or doing what was called for but nonetheless harmful.

Consider, briefly, two examples, both of which reveal the way that bad luck can lead to moral injury. Marine Sergeant Robert L. Sarra was guarding position outside Ash Shatra, Iraq, in the first week of Operation Iraqi Freedom. A woman in a black burqa, carrying a black bag, approached the convoy. After she neared the vehicles, despite repeated warnings to stop, Sergeant Sarra opened fire, and thereafter other marines fired as well. Upon examination of the dead body, they discovered a white flag in the woman's hand. Sarra's actions were in keeping with the rules of engagement, and in his personal notebook he listed seven reasons why he had done the right thing. Nevertheless, he was sickened and haunted, and subsequently refused combat assignment. Upon returning from Iraq, he abused alcohol and instigated multiple bar fights. He was later diagnosed with PTSD.¹⁸

In his autobiography *The Unforgiving Minute*, army Captain Craig Mullaney describes the defining moment of his war service. In September of 2003, his platoon was caught in a firefight in Shkin, Afghanistan, against Al-Qaida and Taliban forces during Operation Enduring Freedom. During the battle, a new member of Mullaney's platoon, Private First Class Evan O'Neill, was killed. Mullaney's recollections are telling. He writes, "O'Neill had been with the platoon only a few days. We'd shared only a handshake, and yet now *I was responsible for his death*."¹⁹ Notably, Mullaney is indignant at the thought that others might hold him at fault, despite his confessed sense of blame. He recounts an exchange when another officer suggests he was, in fact, negligent in his leadership and culpable for O'Neill's death. Mullaney details his reaction: "I walked away . . . my skin grew hot. . . . How could he imply that O'Neill had died because I had failed to prepare. . . . It stung because several times a day, every day since the attack, I had been asking myself what I had done wrong."²⁰

I offer these two examples because they bring into sharp relief one of the key insights of Bernard Williams's concept of agent-regret—that the sphere of our concern, morally speaking, exceeds the sphere of our control. This insight, obscured by strictly legalist moral approaches that center on the bases for praise and blame, helps to disclose the complexity of moral injury. In juridical terms, both Sergeant Sarra and Captain Mullaney were not blameworthy. Nevertheless, such legalistic approaches say nothing about how these individuals experience and interpret their own agency. As it is

manifest in cases like these, moral injury requires us to acknowledge that feelings of responsibility are not predicated on grounds for blame. Insofar as we fail to regard the distinction between responsibility and culpability, we do a disservice to those who carry moral wounds. As Williams explains, "I still cannot see what comfort it is supposed to give to me, or what instruction it offers to other people, if I am shunned, hated, unloved, and despised, *not least by myself*, but am told that these reactions are at any rate not moral."²¹

Whether the emotions that attend moral injury are best viewed as agent-regret or guilt, shame or remorse, or (most often) some combination of these, is beyond the scope of this chapter. While there are valuable distinctions to be made among the moral emotions, we ought not to let the taxonomy distract us from the basic truth that we are "impure" agents, to use Margaret Urban Walker's phrase. As such we are often forced to confront the "loose and chancy fit between undertakings and impacts," between what we would wish to bring about and what we actually do.²² This is perhaps nowhere clearer than in the theater of war and in those who are compelled to act within it.

Moral injury, as I have portrayed it, involves psycho-emotional pain directed to the tragic effects of one's agency. Whether the acts are omissions or commissions, intended or accidental, moral injury entails feelings of responsibility for bad states of affairs and a sense of moral compromise and/or conflict. Having portrayed, albeit briefly, the contours of moral injury, I want to suggest that there is a corresponding virtue that I will call *moral grief*.

THE VIRTUE OF MORAL GRIEF

The basis for a virtue of moral grief, particularly as it applies to the trials of war, can be found in the writings of Augustine of Hippo, whose work provides the foundation for the Christian just-war tradition. Contrary to many in early and late-antique Christianity, Augustine argues that war may be a permissible means to repel injustice and seek peace. Furthermore, he gives warrant for soldiers to kill in combat provided that they are directed by a public authority and that they do so without malice—this despite the fact that Augustine prohibits private acts of self-defense.²³ As with much in Augustine's thought, his concern for warriors is with the orientation of their wills and the content of their hearts. Thus the greatest threats of war, on Augustine's account, are to the spirit, and accordingly "the real evils in war are love of violence, revengeful cruelty, fierce and implacable enmity, wild resistance, and the lust of power, and such like."²⁴

It is with regard to our interior dispositions that Augustine locates a moral demand for grief. In Book XIV of *City of God*, we find Augustine rejecting Stoic *apatheia* and emphasizing the importance of emotion, and specifically

grief, in the full human life. Contrary to the Stoic claim that no grief would befall the wise, Augustine argues that those who fail to grieve the inevitable tragedies of human existence “lose every shred of humanity [rather] than achieve a true tranquility.”²⁵ For Augustine, to engage the world as it is—in theological terms, a fallen world corrupted by sin and marked by death—entails lamenting the ubiquitous suffering of our condition. This is witnessed even in the perfection of humanity, Jesus, whose grief, Augustine notes, is presented throughout the Gospels.²⁶

Having established the place of grief in a good life, Augustine turns in Book XIX to the trials of war. In an oft-noted passage from Book XIX of *The City of God*, we find Augustine lamenting the inexorable character of war and its basis in fear, suspicion, and xenophobia. But after affirming that some wars are necessary and just, Augustine counsels, “And so everyone who reflects with sorrow on such grievous evils, in all their horror and cruelty, must acknowledge the misery of them. And yet a man who experiences such evils, or even thinks about them, without heartfelt grief (*sine animi dolore*), is assuredly in a far more pitiable condition, if he thinks himself happy simply because he has lost all human feeling.”²⁷

There is much that is noteworthy in these remarks. First, Augustine’s reflections take the form of an imperative. Everyone, he claims, *must* contemplate with sorrow the ills of war. Second, the grief at stake for Augustine is deeply moral in nature, a pain based in the proper recognition of beauty lost and cruelty manifest. Grief, Augustine stresses, is the fitting response to the horror of war and reveals a love of the good. Third, the failure to experience such grief is seen as contrary to human nature and right reason, a pitiable and pitiful condition. Fourth and finally, the anguish of the mind and spirit that Augustine urges is required even when the war and those warring are just. That one has complied with the demands of justice and acted as necessary does not halt the call for grief. This follows Augustine’s analysis of grief in Book XIV, where he claims that Jesus, who was without fault, nonetheless suffered grief.²⁸

In Augustine, then, we find the beginning of a case for a distinct form of moral grief, and we see that this grief is warranted even for actions that are permissible, even honorable, in nature. But as I want to develop it, moral grief should not be confused with a general prescription to grieve or grieve well. There are a great many things over which we feel sorrow, and there are certainly better and worse ways to mourn the afflictions of the world.²⁹ The germinal concept of moral grief, by contrast, suggests a distinct form of virtue. This virtue responds to our participation in tragedy and its affront to our moral identity.

The moral grief that I’ve identified in Augustine resembles what Thomas Aquinas counted as the virtue (distinct from the sacrament) of penance. Aquinas argues, as did Augustine, that what might initially appear as a purely

emotional or affective reaction is an act of the will directed by our rational capacities. As he writes, “Now it belongs to right reason that one should grieve for a proper object of grief as one ought to grieve, and for an end for which one ought to grieve.”³⁰ Aquinas claims that to be penitent, to “deplorable something one has done,” implies not only feelings of sorrow but also a specific orientation of the will. Translated into the language of contemporary philosophy, Aquinas argues that the affective dimension of grief is coupled with (1) a propositional object, the action done, (2) a judgment, that the action or state of affairs is bad, and (3) a connotation, a desire not to repeat the action. Aquinas views penance as a species of justice and thus he emphasizes acts of atonement. In doing so, he forfeits some of the nuance of Augustine’s grief, especially the latter’s emphasis distinction between what is worthy of blame and what is worthy of grief. But while I think that Aquinas’s account unduly privileges atonement and the future action-guidance it may provide, the language of penance invites consideration of rich sources in Christian moral theology that speak, at times, directly to the experience of returning warriors. After his return from combat, Craig Mullaney made a ritual of reading the *Washington Post*’s list of American casualties. He explains of this practice, “Scanning those pages was a form of penance, the only connection I had to the war. I was desperate not to forget them, and I was desperate not to forget my own experiences. I willed myself to record every shard of memory I could recall from the deployment. It helped me close the distance.”³¹

Though he does not draw on Aquinas’s discussion of penance as a virtue, Bernard Verkamp, in his seminal work *The Moral Treatment of Returning Warriors*, recounts the penitential practices that were commonplace in late antique and early medieval Christian communities.³² As revealed through Penitentials written from the seventh to twelfth century, clergy were frequently instructed to impose penance on those returning from combat even when these veterans fought in a just cause and might be recognized as heroes. These penances, which might include fasting, abstinence from communion, service, and prayer, were viewed as the means by which the combat veteran was reconciled to civil community and to God. The operative assumption was not that returning soldiers were punishable for crimes of war, but rather that war itself entails evil, lesser though it may be. As Verkamp puts it, “the Christian community of the first millennium generally assumed that warriors returning from battle would or should be feeling guilty and ashamed for all the wartime killing they had done.”³³ However honorable the warrior’s intentions and service, it remains that war entails experiences alien and hostile to civic life. As such, the grief of returning combatants reflects a form of moral re-habitation and sense of oneself as a stranger at home.

Verkamp upholds penance as a challenge to modern therapeutic approaches that dismiss, much as Augustine defended grief in opposition to the

Stoics. Rather than treat the warrior's struggle as a disorder, a malady to be eradicated, Augustine, Aquinas, and Verkamp suggest that we might better think of grief as an essential part of a proper examination of conscience. As Warren Klinhorn has recently argued, moral injury presses the limits of much contemporary psychology and its inability to distinguish between "suffering that aids in the realization of the good life and suffering that thwarts the achievement of these ends."³⁴

We find, then, in Augustine and Aquinas, the basis for viewing grief over one's deeds in war as part of a fully human response to tragedy. In affirming the propriety of moral grief, we also illuminate the dangers of medicalizing what is fundamentally a matter of self-reflection and self-understanding. This should not be taken to suggest that medical treatment is inappropriate, especially in cases of PTSD and brain injury. But the hegemony of the therapeutic model threatens to obscure the ways in which moral grief reflects virtue. Where many therapies, especially pharmaceutical ones, seek to neutralize the experience of psycho-emotional suffering, the present account of moral grief contends that it would be the *absence*, not presence, of lamentation that should be our concern.

The hazard of the therapeutic model is that we collapse the distinction between what Gabriel Marcel described as "problems" and "mysteries."³⁵ Problems, in Marcel's terms, are the domain of empirical science, the hallmark example of which is a math problem. In this light, to view the moral suffering of the combat veteran as a problem is to see it as puzzle in want of a solution; we seek to *solve* the problem by formulating an answer, one which should be universally applicable and replicable. By contrast, a mystery is an inquiry that folds back upon the inquirer, such that the one searching for resolution is herself part and parcel of the resolution. Where a problem stands before us as an objective datum, a mystery involves the subject seeking the subject. The quintessential mystery is the question "Who am I?" In the context of moral grief, this mystery appears as self-discernment: "Who am I who has participated in this?"

As a mystery, the question does not admit of third-person solutions and independent answers. The danger in treating a mystery as a problem is that we risk self-alienation, treating *my* actions and *my* agency as merely occurrences, as though I were a mere bystander or spectator.³⁶ What is at stake, as Marcel puts it, is the opposition of having and being. For our purposes, the point is that combat warriors who experience moral grief do not *have* a disorder, but instead are challenged by the mystery of their own being, the mystery they have become to themselves. For this reason, the search is not for a solution, but for a type of self-awareness born in tragedy. In the context of a mystery, moral grief serves as a virtue of self-knowledge, a posture toward one's self and one's agency, a lamentation seeking understanding.

MEMORY, NARRATIVE, AND REFLEXIVE VIRTUES

"Assuredly, Lord, I toil with this, toil within myself: I have become to myself a soil laborious and of heavy sweat."³⁷ So Augustine describes the challenge of self-understanding and the interpretation of memories. Moral grief and the multifarious feelings that arise with it, including guilt, shame, regret, and remorse, have as a reflective object the memory of past deeds. Typically, it is in digging through, imagining and re-imagining, interpreting and re-interpreting these memories that moral grief operates. Moral grief involves what we might call a geology of the self. The descent through the strata of personal history is, as Augustine says, a labor. By way of conclusion, I want to suggest that the quality of moral grief is determined in no small part by three cooperative virtues that structure moral grief as the mean between unchecked self-loathing and unthinking apathy. These three reflexive virtues—humility, fidelity, and availability—are, loosely speaking, Augustinian in nature and indicate the dispositions necessary to delimit moral grief and distinguish between a virtuous response and the vices of self-alienation and self-destruction.

When speaking of moral injury and the response of moral grief, it may seem strange to see an occasion for humility. Given the tendency toward self-accusation through feelings of guilt and shame, those suffering moral injury hardly seem prone to excessive pride or arrogance. But as it pertains to the self-analysis and self-searching involved in moral grief, humility facilitates an accurate assessment of one's agency and the limits thereof. In this context, humility reflects the recognition of human finitude and renounces an aggrandized sense of agency. We have observed that warriors often experience themselves as both the vehicle for and victim of tragedy. We have seen in the stories of veterans such as O'Brien, Mullaney, and Sarra, an assumption of control that appears exaggerated and a self-impeachment that appears misplaced. This is especially true with so-called survivor guilt, where there is an assertion of blameworthy agency simply for having survived when others did not. As veteran Matt Cook has described it, "The violence and killing have yet to torment me as much as the guilt over the war arbitrarily taking my friends when it could have—maybe should have—taken me instead. Sometimes I wake to them hovering over my bed, paroled from my dreams. I'd ask their forgiveness if I knew they could hear me. There have been days when I'd give anything to trade places."³⁸ In cases such as these, we are dealing with a sense of agency that is mitigated, if not non-existent; yet, the inclination to claim control remains.

Martha Nussbaum has observed that self-blame can be a "valuable antidote to helplessness" because "it seems better that there should be someone to blame than that the universe should be a place of accident."³⁹ Better, it may seem, to be at fault than to be at the whim of fortune. Nevertheless, in

situations of misfortune the belief that one commands circumstance is not only counterfactual but leads to destructive moral confusion. Assuming control in the face of bad luck encourages a vicious cycle of recrimination, followed by absolution, followed by further self-indictment and pardon.

Reflective humility about one's agency underscores the need to distinguish that for which we are responsible—that is, called to respond—and that for which we are blameworthy. Humility aims at the fitting, and thus modest, assessment of our powers over the world. It signals the requirement, as Margaret Walker puts it, “to understand and respond to our actual situation of being at moral risk,” and the fact that “the rational, responsive moral agent is expected to grasp that . . . *responsibilities outrun control*.”⁴⁰ This should not be taken to suggest we are merely fortune's fools or pawns of chance. We do have some control and we are culpable for many things. But questions of blame supervene on a deeper level of responsibility through which we are called to respond to the tragedies of our agency, chosen and otherwise. At this level, humility reflects a process of discernment within moral grief, separating the wheat of what we've chosen from the chaff of what befalls us. Humility directs our attention to the inescapable fact that the correspondence between our agency and our will is rarely perfect, a fact particularly salient in war.

There is a second sense in which humility mediates moral grief, and this is as it relates to self-knowledge. In the *Confessions*, Augustine bemoans the opacity of the self to the self, noting, “For that darkness is lamentable in which the possibilities in me are hidden from myself: so that my mind, questioning itself upon its own powers, feels that it cannot lightly trust its own report.”⁴¹ What is true for all experience is truer still in the so-called fog of war. The elusiveness of self-knowledge is a leitmotif of *The Things They Carried*, in which O'Brien repeatedly draws attention to the slippery truth of war stories, observing that “In war you lose your sense of the definite, hence your sense of truth itself, and therefore it's safe to say that in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true.”⁴²

What Augustine states and O'Brien captures is that the Delphic apothegm can be a cruel maxim; humility beckons the wisdom of Socrates in stressing the priority of what we do not know. “The modesty of a mind admitting incapacity,” Augustine reminds us, “is a finer thing than [self-deceptive] knowledge.”⁴³ Just as humility orients us to the limits of our control, it also directs us to the limits of self-knowledge. There are no perfect sightlines for a vision of the self. Humility calls for both a rigorous honesty in the interpretation of memory, and a realism with regard to the limits of self-awareness and the traps of self-deception. It also, not incidentally, opens us outward to others in the realization that as social beings we know ourselves in relation, and thus the search for self-knowledge is a communal activity, necessitating the participation of friends, spouses, fellow veterans, counselors, and the

civic body at large.⁴⁴ In what I called before the geology of the self, the combat veteran is forced to sift through the dust and humus of memory. In this labor, humility secures one against false claims for both omnipotence and omniscience.

Interrelated with reflexive humility and in part because of what it reveals about self-knowledge, the virtue of fidelity is also central to moral grief. In this context, fidelity connotes a faithfulness to one's self through time and a commitment to the integration of one's past. Fidelity indicates a staying with the stories of our lives, despite the often powerful longing to dissociate if not forget painful memories. For those who suffer moral injury, fidelity suggests a willingness to revisit the hardships, the loss, the compromised agency, even though in recounting the past we may shudder to remember and recoil in grief, as Virgil's Aeneas does in narrating his ordeal to Dido.⁴⁵ We witness this fidelity in Augustine's *Confessions*, where after ten years he continues to search his grief over his mother's death. We likewise see fidelity depicted in *The Things They Carried*, where the horror of war “lives in its own dimension, replaying itself over and over.” Throughout O'Brien's work, we find him repeatedly probing the darkest hours of combat to find different meanings and new shadows. War memoirs, war memorials, the allegiance to personal history and story: these are the hallmarks of fidelity.

In the preface to his epic poem about World War I, David Jones explains that he titled it *In Parenthesis* because it was written “in a kind of space in between—I don't know between quite what . . . and because for us amateur soldiers . . . the war itself was a parenthesis.”⁴⁶ Jones's remark implies—though his own poem belies this—that war might be viewed as a parenthetical, a digression from one's real life and therefore best kept in brackets. Fidelity weighs against the impulse to disavow the past and commends a promise to one's self to remember and remember well.

As a virtue in concert with moral grief, fidelity stands in opposition to those forms of therapy that seek to emancipate memories or to reprogram them. Fidelity would suggest caution, for instance, in turning to drug therapies which seek to divorce memories from emotion and personal agency. To be sure, we should not dismiss the fact that the tragic memories to which we remain faithful are haunting, often agonizing. But it seems suspect, if not misguided, to suggest that we ought not attend to those events that are most formative in our lives, those events the absence of which would make our present selves unrecognizable. For those who suffer moral injury, the grief, though unwelcome, becomes (to repurpose Daniel Dennett's phrase) a center of narrative gravity, an essential element in the sense and story of self. Fidelity suggests there is a sense in which we are required to keep moral wounds open and to allow ourselves to be cultivated by the pain that is involved. To do otherwise is to risk a still more damaging moral fragmentation and self-alienation.

In staying with our memories, we are led to a third virtue. This virtue, which Gabriel Marcel has called *disponibilité*, indicates a willingness to be shaped and to be called into response. Typically translated as "availability," *disponibilité* on Marcel's account involves a readiness to be formed and transformed by circumstances and by others. The antithesis of hardened inflexibility and unresponsiveness, this availability structures not only our self-inquiry but also our relationships to others.

In regard to the memory work of moral grief, to be available is to resist both the rejection and the reification of our past. Closely wedded to fidelity, reflexive availability is readiness to be formed through our commitment to memories and to accept the responsibilities that the past brings into the present. Not to be confused with *living in the past*, availability to memories involves the past *living into* the present and the future. In availability, memories are animated and continue to shape and be reshaped through an open-ended reflection. This is to say, memories and moral grief are not static, but evolve and change over time. Augustine reflects this in his petition throughout the *Confessions*: "What was it, O my God, that You accomplished then?" Through availability we recognize that we both possess and are possessed by our memories and emotions, and we remain open to the shifting demands that these memories and emotions place upon us.

To be unavailable, by contrast, is to allow for the calcification of the past, which in turn threatens to hypostatize the future. The past for one who lacks availability becomes an albatross that curses the future. "What must be understood," Marcel writes, "is that the more the past is immobilized, the more the future seems already to have elapsed before its actual advent; the contamination of the future by the past, is one of the sources of fatalism."⁴⁷ With the virtue of *disponibilité*, Marcel stresses the fact that one's relationship to the past is neither simply active nor passive, but involves an engaged receptivity, a commitment to open ourselves to the unknown.⁴⁸ In grieving these memories with openness, we may begin to gain purchase on our moral identity within the vicissitudes of life. In availability to the past, the morally injured express the hope for an integrated self, a self re-collected into an intelligible unity.

Taken together, humility, fidelity, and availability in the labors of memory are dispositions that reflect the paradoxical fact that we both have a past, and yet in a certain sense we *are* our past. Just as physical injury forces us to confront the dual modalities of *having* a body and *being* our body, moral injury presses us to realize that our past and our identity as agents in the world is a product both of what is willed and what is unwilling. In the face of moral tragedy, to be responsive to this duality—*responsible* in the widest sense—is to be humble, faithful, and available in our grief.

Having suggested that moral injury can be and is often met with a virtuous moral grief, I want in conclusion to underscore that my intention is not to

praise suffering. But neither is my purpose to suggest a redemption narrative. Just as we might well identify the presence of patience, fortitude, and courage in those who renegotiate life after acute physical injury, so too the presence of moral grief as a virtue does not suggest that the warrior is better off than before the injury occurred. We are not always "strong in the broken places." Indeed, when tempted by the felicity of Hemingway's oft-quoted line, we should remember his insight in full:

If people bring so much courage to this world the world has to kill them to break them, so of course it kills them. The world breaks every one and afterward many are strong at the broken places. But those that will not break it kills. It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially. If you are none of these you can be sure it will kill you too but there will be no special hurry.⁴⁹

The pain of moral injury leaves many with indelible scars. Many are not stronger. Thus, to say that there is virtuous suffering is not to say that suffering is virtuous. Nevertheless, I suggest that in a life subject to tragedy, to be fully human is to have the capacity for moral grief, however much we rightly hope to avoid it. And as it pertains to war, we might better recognize the great weight of virtue and avoid it more often than we do.

NOTES

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1. Brett T. Litz et al., "Moral Injury and Moral Repair in War Veterans: A Preliminary Model and Intervention Strategy," *Clinical Psychology Review* 29 (2009): 697.

2. Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York: Scribner, 1994); Shay, *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming* (New York: Scribner, 2002); Shay, "Casualties," *Daedalus* 140 (2011): 179–88.

3. See Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Williams, "Moral Luck" in *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973–1980* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, rev. ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

4. Shay, *Casualties*, 184.

5. *Ibid.*, 183. Shay, among others, has weighed against the diagnostic term "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder," arguing that PTSD and its emphasis upon "disorder" misrepresents and belittles the service members and fails to afford the same honor and dignity bestowed upon those who are physically injured.

6. Litz et al., 695–706.

7. *Ibid.*, 698.

8. Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (New York: Mariner Books, 2009), 7.

9. *Ibid.*, 20, 31.

10. Steve Robinson, "A Soldier's Heart," directed, and produced by Raney Aronson. "Frontline," Public Broadcasting Service, March 08, 2005, accessed June 22, 2013, www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/heart/etc/script.html.
11. O'Brien, 171–72.
12. See Nancy Sherman, "Soldiers' Moral Wounds," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (April 11, 2010); Nancy Sherman, *The Untold War* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010).
13. O'Brien, 171.
14. For Williams's discussion of agent-regret, see especially "Moral Luck."
15. I do not think that Williams's account of agent-regret is nearly as harmless as Sherman suggests, and indeed Williams goes to lengths to dispel the idea that agent-regret is akin to a simple "Oh well." Nevertheless, the phrase "agent-regret" is inapt.
16. In *Shame and Necessity*, 70, Williams observes, "This is not just regret about what happened, such as a spectator might have. It is an agent's regret, and it is in the nature of action that such regrets cannot be eliminated."
17. Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, 69.
18. Louise Kiernan, "Coming Out on the Other Side," *Chicago Tribune*, July 2, 2004, accessed June 14, 2013, articles.chicagotribune.com/2004-07-02/news/0407020125_1_marine-corps-war-and-occupation-operation-iraqi-freedom.
19. Craig M. Mullaney, *The Unforgiving Minute: A Soldier's Education* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), 285–86.
20. *Ibid.*, 304.
21. Williams, "Postscript" in *Moral Luck*, ed. Daniel Statman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 254. The emphasis is my own.
22. Margaret Urban Walker, "The Virtues of Impure Agency," in *Moral Luck*, ed. Daniel Statman, 241.
23. For a nice overview of Augustine's treatment of war, see John Langan, "The Elements of St. Augustine's Just War Theory," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 12 (1984): 19–38.
24. Augustine, *Reply to Faustus*, trans. R. Sothert, in *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*. Vol. 4, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1956), 22.74.
25. Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin Books, 1972), 14.9. For Augustine's extended treatment of emotion, especially grief, see XIV.6–10.
26. *Ibid.*, XIV.9.
27. *Ibid.*, XIX.7.
28. Augustine presages Williams's distinction between the basis for grief and the basis for blame when he claims that in a fallen world, "we do well if our life is free from external blame. But anyone who thinks that his life is without [lamentable] sin does not succeed in avoiding sin, but rather in forfeiting pardon" (*Ibid.*, XIV.9).
29. For a rich exploration of how to grieve well in Augustinian terms, see William Werpehowski, "Weeping at the Death of Dido: Sorrow, Virtue, and Augustine's 'Confessions,'" *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 19, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 175–91.
30. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Benzinger Brothers (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1981), III, Q. 85, Art. 1.
31. Mullaney, 352.
32. Bernard J. Verkamp, *Moral Treatment of Returning in Early Medieval and Modern Times* (Scranton, PA: University of Scranton Press, 1993).
33. *Ibid.*, 11.
34. Warren Kinghorn, "Combat Trauma and Moral Fragmentation: A Theological Account of Moral Injury," *The Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 32, no. 2 (Fall / Winter 2012): 57–74.
35. For a brief synopsis of Marcel's distinction between problems and mysteries, see Gabriel Marcel, *Mystery of Being*, Vol. 1, trans. G. S. Fraser (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2001), 5–10; Gabriel Marcel, *Philosophy of Existentialism*, trans. Many Harari (New York: Citadel Press, 1962), 16–17.
36. Marcel writes, "A kind of rift then appears, either between me and the total [action], or still more serious, between me and myself. (This will be the case if I somehow disassociate myself, the pure spectator, from the immanent actions by which my participation was ex-

- pressed: but these actions, thus isolated and robbed of their meaning, lose all significance)" *Being and Having*, trans. Katherine Farrer (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1949), 17.
37. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. F. J. Sheed (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1993), X.16.
 38. Matt Cook, "The Call of Battle," *Texas Monthly*, July 2013. Accessed 02 July 2013. www.texasmonthly.com/story/call-battle?fullpage=1.
 39. Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 29n19. Jonathan Shay has likewise noted the assertion of control as one of the functions of the warrior's guilt in *Odysseus*, 80.
 40. Walker, 241.
 41. Augustine, *Confessions*, X.32.
 42. O'Brien, 78.
 43. Augustine, *Confessions*, V.7.
 44. Though it is beyond the scope of the present chapter, I believe there is a strong case to be made for civic virtues that correspond to each of these reflexive virtues.
 45. Virgil, *Aeneid*, 2.10–13.
 46. David Jones, *In Parenthesis* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1961), xv.
 47. Gabriel Marcel, *Creative Fidelity*, translated by Robert Rosthal (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 52.
 48. Gabriel Marcel, *Homo Viator*, trans. Emma Craufurd and Paul Seaton (South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine's Press, 2010).
 49. Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957), 239.