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Introduction

Helping vs. harming, understanding vs. judging

Imagine that you are sitting on a bus and the person on the seat next to you starts coughing. At first you try to ignore the cough, but as the coughing continues you alternate between irritation and sympathy, between looking for another seat to move to and thinking of ways to stop this person from coughing. Remembering that you have a throat lozenge in your bag, you offer it to your seat companion, who gladly takes it. After a minute or two the coughing subsides, and as a result you smile and nod to your seat companion who in turn smiles and nods back, leaving you feeling satisfied as you return to what you had been doing previously.

This rather mundane situation appears to be a simple, straightforward case of helping someone in need. Yet, what if the cough was not merely the result of your seat companion having a throat irritation, but was the result of them being more sensitive than anyone else to something wrong with the bus? Then the lozenge, in coating this person's throat, would have put an end to not only the cough, but also to the sole warning of an otherwise unperceived danger in the environment.

What this imagined situation is meant to illustrate is both our tendency to see unwanted interruptions to our everyday lives as incidents that we already understand and are capable of judging how best to overcome, and our tendency to see overcoming these unwanted interruptions as helpful rather than potentially harmful. For even if we did suspect that there was something more going on beneath the surface here, something that we were not capable of understanding or of judging, we would still believe that we understood the coughing well enough to judge that this person needed to go see a doctor, someone capable of filling in the gaps in our understanding and our judgment. It must be realized, though, that if the cough was caused by environmental rather than

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individual factors, then of course the judgment that the person ought to see a doctor would be more obstructive than useful. What this situation further reveals then is how what seems like helping someone else can in reality prove to be, not only hurtful to that person, but to ourselves as well. As long as we see such situations as simple and straightforward, as situations that we already understand and that we can therefore judge, rather than as situations that reveal a world more complex than we are accustomed to, as situations that require that we withhold our judgment until we can understand them, then we might not be able to truly determine what is “help” and what is “harm” until it is too late.

Now let us turn to a real, though perhaps still parallel, situation that confronts us today. Since the start of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in 2001, more active-duty and veteran members of the United States military have killed themselves than have been killed by the enemy, and at a rate of almost 25 to 1.¹ The Department of Defense estimates that between 2005 and 2010, active-duty service members committed suicide at a rate of roughly once every 36 hours, while veterans committed suicide at a rate of roughly once every eighty minutes. Owing to these staggering rates, “while only 1 percent of Americans have served during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, former service members represent 20 percent of suicides in the United States.”²

Are we helping these active-duty and veteran members of the military population by responding to their suffering with the judgment that they should be treated for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)? Or are we harming them, and perhaps ourselves in the process, by believing that we understand this situation better than we actually do? Even if the judgment that these members of the military require PTSD treatment results in the decrease or disappearance of their PTSD symptoms, do we then *know* that we have been helpful? Or, like the situation of a person coughing on the bus, are we using the *apparent* success of our judgments to retroactively confirm that we *must* have at the very least a *sufficient* understanding of the situation?

Rather than believing that we already know the answer to these questions, it is vital that we take seriously the possibility that what we currently view as “supporting the troops” is in fact preventing us from recognizing the truth of not only *their* situation, but of *our* situation as well. To better understand the need to consider this possibility, let us turn to yet another related situation. In Dan Baum’s recent *New Yorker* article “The Price of Valor,” he writes of the following incident:

Debbie watched the waitress clear our plates, then she leaned forward to tell about a night in July, after Carl’s return, when they went with

some friends to the Afterhours Enlisted Club at Fort Benning. Carl had a few drinks, Debbie said, and started railing at the disk jockey, shouting, "I want to hear music about people blowing people's brains out, cutting people's throats!" Debbie continued, "I said, 'Carl. Shut up.' He said, 'No, I want to hear music about shit I've seen!'" Carl listened to Debbie's story with a loving smile, as though she were telling about him losing his car keys. "I don't remember that," he said, laughing.³

It is tempting to see in this situation examples of many of the symptoms of PTSD, symptoms such as hyperarousal, intrusive memories, avoidance, and emotional numbing. Indeed, it is likely that this too is how Debbie responded, for even beyond the mainstream press and publicity that PTSD has received since its official recognition in 1980,⁴ the friends, family, and even employers of returning veterans can be personally provided with information about PTSD. Given pamphlets such as "Returning from the War Zone: A Guide for Families of Military Members," those closest to returning veterans are prepared so that, should situations like Carl's occur, someone in a position like Debbie's will know what to do rather than just getting scared.

However, it must be realized that "what to do" often involves learning how to "listen" to a veteran, where listening is not meant to be listening *for the sake of listening*, thus not to try to understand the veteran's experiences, but in order to judge if the veteran has any of the "warning signs"⁵ that the pamphlet advises friends and family to be on the lookout for so they can recommend that the veteran see a professional. Yet, these professionals have likewise been trained to listen, not for the sake of listening, but for the sake of diagnosing. Hence if, for example, the attempts of veterans to talk with those closest to them are met with attempts to "help [them] put feelings into words," with the suggestion "that they visit a chaplain" or with the encouragement to "reach out to other veterans" who "can relate to their feelings," then it is likely that these veterans might get upset, and then be seen as having "poor communication" and "depressed or angry moods."⁶ Consequently, and not unlike students in introductory psychology classes who tend to diagnose everyone around them with whatever disorder they just learned about, family and friends – primed to be "aware of some common stress reactions" and to "watch out for signs" of "other treatable mental health problems"⁷ – can not only find such reactions and such signs without difficulty, but family and friends can *elicit* such reactions and such signs through their very awareness and their watchfulness.

Furthermore, should veterans turn to other veterans in order to attempt to provide each other the listening audience not found at

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home, this is in turn seen as “healthy coping,”⁸ which *reinforces* our current understanding of veterans with the “evidence” that these judgments are “working.” Should veterans further turn away from home and turn back to the military entirely and “want to return to deployment,” this is not seen as another manifestation of their suffering, but as one of the “positive reactions to deployment” because redeployment shows that “they want to serve their country and work with their fellow service members.”⁹ We can conclude from this either that our understanding produces results that are successful and helpful, or that our understanding produces a self-justifying circularity that prevents us from knowing how helpful our judgments truly have been.

For all the revolutions in military thinking and fighting, our views on military suffering have remained surprisingly consistent throughout history. Although our tools and terms have become more sophisticated, the gap between how we used to think of “soldier’s heart,” “war nerves,” and “shell shock” and how we currently think of PTSD and traumatic brain injury (TBI) is not nearly as large as we might assume.¹⁰ This is all the more apparent when we take into consideration that our latest method of reducing combatant suffering – replacing human combatants with inhuman drones, robots, or software – operates on a principle of warfare that has existed since man first tried wielding a rock: the greater the distance from combat, the lesser the suffering from combat.

The current drive to “unmanned” warfare has already begun to show signs that, while such warfare may be “bloodless,”¹¹ it is not “riskless”¹² as even unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) operators have been found to be suffering from symptoms of PTSD.¹³ Such findings only further highlight our need to rethink not just what constitutes “help” and “harm,” but also other such seemingly simple and straightforward concepts as “risk” and “distance.” Hence, we must be willing to broaden rather than narrow our understanding of what combat does to combatants. In other words, we must take seriously the possibility that although we have answers to combatant suffering we are not asking the right questions, which leaves us in a position like that of the people who accepted the Emperor’s “new clothes,” until someone who could see the world differently from the rest not only spoke up, but was heard.

In this vein, let us now return to Debbie’s story about what happened at the Afterhours Enlisted Club. If we withhold our judgment and try to understand what Carl was experiencing, we find that Carl was not merely having some sort of dissociative episode, but was communicating to us – even if unintentionally – how he had come to see the world differently from the rest of us. Although it would seem to contradict

the fact that this episode occurred after Carl had returned home from Iraq, his *need* to hear such specifically violent music, music that recalls the experience of war, music about “people blowing people’s brains out, cutting people’s throats,” points to the idea that Carl no longer experiences his home *as home*, but as an alien place, as a place that urges him toward the seeming paradox of the security and comfort of war.¹⁴ From this perspective, Carl’s suffering could be better understood if seen not as symptomatic of PTSD and his inability to cope with the “trauma of war,” but as instead a manifestation of his inability to cope with the *revelatory experience of war*, with how the nature of the world and the nature of humanity are revealed in war to be not as they had appeared to be in peace. This revelation does not disappear upon returning to peace, but becomes more pervasive.

The idea that combatants could, while *at war*, experience the world or themselves as different might not surprise us, and could be said to be the focus of how we are already treating the suffering of veterans. Hence, we use cognitive behavioral therapy to help veterans to see that the world is not as strange as they think it is, and we use exposure therapy to help veterans to relive their wartime experiences until they can become accustomed to them. The idea behind these therapeutic methods is that to suffer from PTSD is to suffer from a “maladaptive disorder,” from an inability to properly adapt to events that are so different from the everyday. The goal of therapy is to help veterans adapt to these events so they could later think about these events or experience something reminiscent of these events and behave in a more reasonable, more normal, more everyday manner, recognizing that these events are over and that they are now safe and sound back home.

But what is missed or subsumed by diagnosing veterans like Carl with PTSD is the question of what it *means* that Carl, after having *returned to peace*, still experiences himself and the world as he did while at war, and, further, is responding to being back with his family and friends by essentially *turning peace into war*. It is as if what was “safe” and what was “hostile,” what was “home” and what was “alien,” what was “war” and what was “peace,” were now experienced by Carl as not merely different from, but as *diametrically opposed* to, what we would expect. By simply judging war to be “traumatic” and these experiences to be “trauma symptoms,” we are then not only seeing Carl’s experiences of war through our own eyes rather than through his, but also seeing Carl’s experiences of peace through our own eyes rather than through his.

Nevertheless, it is not unlikely that Carl might find some relief in being diagnosed with PTSD, in discovering that he is not alone, and

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from being put into group therapy sessions with other veterans like himself or into exposure therapy sessions where he could re-experience his time in war. We can now begin to see that these therapeutic strategies might be “successful” precisely because of how Carl has found war to be safer than peace and his fellow veterans as closer to him than his own family. Such therapy is “therapeutic” precisely because it *feeds* and *satisfies* his attempts to rediscover the experience of war. Just as we need to investigate what it means to be diagnosed with PTSD, we must also investigate what it means to be diagnosed as having had one’s symptoms decreased, or to even be diagnosed as not having these symptoms altogether. We are, as anyone who has been diagnosed with depression surely knows, very proficient at naming and treating “symptoms,” but this in no way entails that we are proficient at properly understanding and judging the *meaning* of such “symptoms.”

From PTSD theory to just war theory

From treating combat veterans, certain psychologists have started to realize, as I have been arguing, that the predominant view of PTSD does not fit the experiences of a significant portion of PTSD sufferers, namely those who have been found to have been traumatized by acts they perpetrated against others, rather than by acts perpetrated against them. Such a realization has led these psychologists to advocate for changing our understanding of fear as *the* underlying cause of PTSD to the idea that there are *causes*, one of which is “moral injury.” Having perpetrated acts that, though sanctioned by the military were not sanctioned by morality, combatants have been “injured” by the conflict between their moral standards and the immorality of what they did or what they witnessed during their military service. The resulting PTSD injury is centered much more around guilt than around fear.¹⁵ My project here, as one of these psychologists advocating moral injury might argue, unnecessarily tries to get us to rethink our understanding of PTSD and combatant suffering when PTSD and combatant suffering have already been so rethought. What would be needed then is to rethink how best to treat combatants given this new understanding of suffering, a project best left to the psychologists who have already spent the last several years working on this, rather than philosophers who would provide too little, too late.

On the face of it, this concept of “moral injury” appears to offer precisely the more expansive approach to suffering that I have been discussing. However, if we begin to dig deeper into this concept it becomes clear that this approach is not nearly as revolutionary, or even as expansive,

as it may at first appear to be. To say that we learn morality growing up from our parents, friends, and teachers, culminating in the development of a conscience that has certain core standards like “Thou shalt not kill,” a conscience that is deeply in conflict with what war requires of us and exposes us to, is to ignore much of the experiences of morality and of war. As Rita Nakashima Brock and Gabriella Lettini show when they try to explain the “moral” of “moral injury,” as soon as we try to divorce morality from socio-cultural particularities – “most of us are trained to respect others, to relate to a world bigger than ourselves, and to feel compassion for those who suffer” – we likewise divorce morality from individuality, imposing on each of us a “basic humanity.”¹⁶

To begin to see what is wrong with this approach, let me ask simply, what does “respect,” “relate,” or “compassion” mean here? For Kant, for example, respect meant complete obedience and that I am willing to sacrifice my own inclinations at the behest of the one I respect. Most likely, what is meant here by respect is something far less severe, but also something far less clear, such as caring about someone or being honest with someone. This answer only opens up further questions about what “care” and “honesty” mean, and then the slippery slope toward asking what we mean by any element of our moral lexicon has begun.

Such confusion over the meaning of moral terms is not my focus here, however, as what is more important is to recognize how often what combatants experience in combat is precisely this very confusion. To have been confronted by decisions that seem somehow both right and wrong, by scenes that seem somehow both spiritual and grotesque, by individuals who seem somehow both heroic and monstrous, is not necessarily to have experienced the “injury” of having “abandon[ed] the values and beliefs that gave their lives meaning and guided their moral choices,”¹⁷ as this abandonment could instead be seen as *revelatory*. If there is an “injury” that occurs here it does not have to be an injury *to the combatant*; it could be seen as an injury *to morality*, or, as Nietzsche might put it, as the injurious revelation that what we take to be morality should instead be qualified as “all that has hitherto been celebrated on earth as morality.”¹⁸ In other words, I am not challenging the claim of Brock and Lettini that “moral injury can lead veterans to have feelings of worthlessness, remorse, and despair,”¹⁹ but I am challenging how this is interpreted by Brock, Lettini, and others as necessarily being “feelings” veterans have about *themselves* rather than revelatory experiences veterans have about *morality itself*.

To take these feelings as a sign of agony over one’s own moral status rather than over the status of morality itself is to take for granted both

that morality exists and that morality exists as noncombatants experience it, not how combatants experience it. This conception of “moral injury” repeats many of the problems of the classic conception of PTSD that it was meant to resolve. To say that what combatants experience is a “violation of what *is* right”²⁰ is to presume that there is a “right” and that we know what “right” *is*. Hence, when a “Marine lieutenant colonel” told these practitioners that he was “‘insulted’ by the term moral injury,” perhaps it was not that he was mistaken because “the message has yet to sink in,”²¹ but that he had received the message loud and clear, the message that noncombatant experience of the world is the benchmark for judging combatant experience of the world, and not the other way around.

We find a similar view of morality and a similar privileging of noncombatant perspectives over combatant perspectives in the paradigmatic philosophy of war known as just war theory. As Michael Walzer, and those who have followed in his footsteps, have adopted an anti-foundational philosophical framework centered around “common morality” – or the perspective that morality is founded on the stable and universal bedrock of “common sense” shared by all humans – the arguments of contemporary just war theorists are based on portrayals of past wartime experiences rather than on metaphysical speculation or utilitarian calculation. Using the tools that the common morality perspective provides, the tools of casuistry and what I refer to as “empathic projection,” Walzer and others attempt to establish what ought to be permissible in war by analyzing what past experience has shown to be acceptable and possible to achieve in previous wars. Just war theorists therefore believe that they can not only understand the past experiences of combatants as found in historical records, memoirs, and correspondence, but that they can derive principles and rules from the actions and reflections of combatants in the past for the purposes of regulating and adjudicating combatants in the present and future.

While I agree with Walzer and other like-minded just war theorists that one could not determine the morality of war without interrogating the experience of war, I disagree with how Walzer and contemporary just war theorists carry out this interrogation and with their reliance on the common morality perspective. This perspective distorts the experiences of combatants by viewing them through the lens of noncombatant experience. By taking combatants and noncombatants to belong to the same moral world, just war theorists are able to overcome the challenge of realists by claiming that moral judgments can apply to war. But in exchange for this access to the “powers-that-be,” they have closed

off access to precisely what it is about combatant experience that motivates the realist challenge time and again. The just war theorist, like the PTSD theorist, responds to the *incommensurability* experienced by combatants – the incommensurability between those who have been to war and those who have not been to war – not by *interrogating* this experience, but by trying to *overcome* it. Just as for the PTSD theorist there is but one way of experiencing the world and the veteran only needs proper therapy to again experience the world *in the right way*, so too for the just war theorist there is but one way of experiencing the moral world, and the combatant only needs proper training to experience morality *in the right way*.

From common sense to exile

It is the combatant's experience of the world and of humanity, as well as this *privileging* – by both PTSD and just war theorists – of the noncombatant's experience of the world and of humanity, that my use of the concept of “exile” is meant to capture. Beyond the ordinary meaning of exile as a form of punishment,²² we can also see in it a deeper meaning that could perhaps best be described as “unbelongingness” both in the sense of the world not belonging to humans and of humans not belonging to the world. An example of this could be found in a concept that both PTSD and just war theory share: *resilience*.²³ For if what is proper for a combatant is to be “resilient,” to be able to “adapt” to the experience of war, to be able to experience the horror of war and to find ways to “cope” with those horrors in both “healthy” and “moral” ways, then perhaps the true “trauma” of war – what is revealed to combatants in experiences said to be “traumatic” – is the very possibility that to be human is *to be nothing more than adaptable*.²⁴

What combatants confront – whether consciously or not – in such experiences then is the idea that, if humans can adapt to war, then humans can adapt to *anything*. Consequently, the line between “war” and “peace” can become blurred as the presumption that peace is necessarily *better* than war can start to look like a difference between what the *majority* has already adapted to and that to which only a *minority* has had to adapt. Shared experiences then would become far more important than a shared childhood or a shared hometown, for which reason brothers-in-arms would be a closer bond than would be brothers by birth. The world – which formerly appeared to be divided into clear oppositions between right and wrong, good and evil, and home and alien – would now appear more strange, as though *anything*

could be “right,” “good,” or “home,” given enough time to adapt to it. In other words, through the experience of war what can be revealed to combatants is that the ground upon which one based one’s identity, the ground upon which one had formerly made claims about what the world *is* and who one *is*, was not nearly as stable as was assumed. What is discovered in war then is that “the ground” is but one of any possible number of “grounds” upon which one could have found oneself and through which one could have made *completely different identity claims*.

What is further discovered by veterans returning to peace is that this groundlessness and unbelongingness exist there too, yet instead of experiencing a crisis of identity over it, friends and family, coworkers and neighbors, strangers and acquaintances, all seem to act as if the ground is indeed stable, and it is the veteran who is unstable.²⁵ This reaction to the challenge presented by returning veterans is indicative of how it is that veterans come to have such discoveries in war rather than in peace. For while it is possible to have experiences in peace that call into question the habits and norms of everyday life – experiences ranging from the unexpected betrayal of a friend to standing on the edge of a precipice – our adaptability helps us to avoid pursuing the meaning of these experiences down the rabbit holes they reveal. Instead, we reduce these experiences to “feelings” or “attacks,” reducing ourselves in the process, as there are inadaptable aspects of being human – our mortality, our embodiment, and our responsibility – that we must avoid if we are to avoid the meaning of these experiences.

It is precisely this tension between the revelatory nature of the experience of war and the evasive nature of the experience of peace that J. Glenn Gray sought to explore in his work. In his book *The Warriors*, Gray – a philosopher and a World War II veteran – phenomenologically describes the process of becoming a warrior, a “*Homo furens*,” and carries out an existential investigation into the meaning of this process of being transformed in and through war that could leave combatants alternating between ecstasy and guilt, between madness and despair. Gray provides us with the tools to move beyond “common sense” understandings and judgments of war to be able to not only investigate the experiences of combatants, but to learn from them how to properly investigate the experiences of noncombatants. In other words, just as someone coughing on a bus can reveal to us both the nature of the bus as dangerous and of ourselves as too pragmatic to be perceptive, so too can the suffering of combatants reveal to us both the nature of the world as *un-home-like* and of humanity as *exile*.

Overview of the book: from criticism to creation

Philosophy is often seen as useful in policy debates with regards to the tasks of clarity, consistency, and critique, but not with regards to the task of creation. This project therefore clarifies key relationships between noncombatants and combatants, reveals inconsistencies in how we think about both noncombatants and about combatants, and criticizes how noncombatants judge rather than try to understand combatants. To move from criticizing to creating – if such a move is possible – will require finding a way to collapse this distinction between noncombatants and combatants so as to move from judging to understanding. If the ultimate aim of our policy debates concerning war and the suffering of veterans is to create a world where there is no more war and no more suffering veterans, then such an aim could only ever be achieved by noncombatants discovering in peace what combatants have been able to discover in war: that our response to human adaptability and to the groundlessness of the world is to evade both, and that this evasion, this evasion that comprises and preserves our everyday life of peace, serves to *perpetuate* war.

Yet, it will likely be argued that ending the suffering of veterans is in fact *not* the agreed upon ultimate aim of our policy debates. For if there is one belief that both practitioners of war and practitioners of peace have in common it is that the suffering of veterans is what is largely responsible for *limiting* the perpetuation of war. On one side, there are politicians, military leaders, and CEOs who, as part of the military-industrial complex, benefit from war, and want to end the suffering of veterans only to remove an obstacle to increasing these benefits. On the other side, there are activists, educators, and NGO workers who see ending the suffering of veterans as losing a cost necessary for fighting the military-industrial complex. What must be recognized, though, is that another belief that both practitioners of war and practitioners of peace have in common is the presupposition that the suffering of veterans *can be brought to an end*. The belief that what veterans are suffering from is treatable, manageable, curable, is – as my attempts at clarity, consistency, and critique are meant to show – what allows practitioners of war and practitioners of peace to likewise presuppose that the suffering of veterans is *solely caused by war*, and that the inability of veterans to find peace back at home is due only to their being veterans of war rather than also being due to *the peace the rest of us call home*.

This vital relationship between the suffering of veterans and the nature of both war and peace will only be realized when we no longer

see this suffering as punishment for participating in the crime of war, or as the taint of surviving the hell of war, or as the inability to cope with the trauma of war. So long as we continue to think of war as a particular event or a particular place, or as we continue to think of the suffering of war as a specific set of feelings caused by a specific trauma, or as we continue to think of veterans as unique individuals or as a unique class of society, we will continue the *exile* of veterans and the *estrangement* of ourselves. Veterans have been transformed *in* and *through* war, but not *because of* war. Rather, veterans have come to discover that they are not at home in the world *because they are human*. By tracing out the implications of this transformation, this book aims to raise new questions about war to replace our old answers about the suffering of war.

This project is carried out in two parts. Part 1 raises questions about the fundamental presuppositions of just war theory, and in particular about how just war theorists conceive of humanity, to show – with the help of J. Glenn Gray – the need to reconceive responsibility as fundamental to what it means to be human rather than being seen as merely a way to distribute praise and blame. Part 2 then applies this deeper understanding of responsibility to the debates that are currently taking place concerning torture, unmanned warfare, and PTSD, which will reveal the need to question our assumptions about the nature of both war and peace.

There are important divisions separating the opposing sides of these debates, divisions over whether torture is ever justifiable, whether drones and cyberwarfare will make waging war too easy, whether PTSD is the result of one's psychology or of one's morality. Yet, what should be of greater concern to us are the vital presuppositions that are shared by these sides, presuppositions such as that humans can overcome death, are more mental than physical, and are responsible only for what we directly cause. These presuppositions are what need to be interrogated as they are what allow these debates to continue rather than to move us toward a robust understanding of peace that is not merely based on the absence of war, but is based on an understanding of the world and of what it means to be human.

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