

The Experience of War: Moral Transformation, Injury, and Repair

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Overview of Program

As part of an initiative by the National Endowment for the Humanities to promote understanding of the military experience and support returning veterans, Hunter College has received a major grant that will fund public events and classroom opportunities for veterans, other students, and non-student members of the community. Participants will explore classic works of literature, history, and philosophy to illuminate moral transformation, injury, and repair resulting from the experience of war. As part of the grant, a group of internationally acclaimed researchers, writers, and public intellectuals will visit Hunter to engage the public in wider discussion and provide capstone experiences for students.

In the first phase of our program (fall 2016) we will prepare discussion leaders to facilitate close reading and discussion of relevant monumental works in humanities, drawn from literature and philosophy. These works will be paired with models of excellence in bringing humanistic perspectives and interests to the program theme, treating wars ancient and modern. In the second phase (spring 2017), groups of veterans and non-veterans will meet for discussions of the classic and contemporary works. A series of public events will provide capstone opportunities, as leaders and participants will interact with the authors of the contemporary works to deepen their appreciation of the thematic content of the series and the enduring relevance of humanities for reflecting on some of the most pressing concerns in the public sphere.

Intellectual Rationale

Service and the Good Life—How can one live a life of meaning and purpose? What makes one a good person, a good friend, a good citizen, son or daughter, sister or husband? What are our obligations to each other, our communities, and even ourselves? Exploration and pursuit of these enduring questions have shaped what we call the humanities. That human beings find a common cause with others who feel the urgency of these concerns is what allows Achilles' lamentation—*and rage*—following the death of his friend to resonate across millennia and a vastly different economy of practical life.

For many, military service provides a pathway to achieving what is regarded as a good life: a way to develop human excellence, earn respect and honor, and be embedded in networks of relations that value trust, competence, and care. Military training conditions service members physically and psychologically to effectively respond to the needs and demands of the mission. Service in the war theater maximally challenges that training and the capabilities it produces with lifelong transformative effects. Participants in the program will explore the nature of such transformation and the ways in which it can be perceived as both positive—potentially ennobling—and negative, resulting in injuries with pervasive impact, including rupturing the moral

integrity of those who suffer them. Moral integrity in this sense refers to the development and cohesion of a person's socio-moral framework: the capacities for imagination and judgment that enable a person to plan, interpret, and take responsibility for his or her actions among others in the community, including among family, friends, co-workers, and neighbors.

Moral Injury and the Experience of War—During the past two decades, scholars, researchers, and clinicians have come to recognize that among the injuries deployed service members may experience are those affecting one's sense of oneself as a moral being and one's place in a moral community; this is the heart of what is called moral injury. While there is no fixed definition of the phenomenon, consensus is emerging that moral injury is distinct from post-traumatic stress and resistant to therapeutic measures that have proven effective for treating those who have experienced trauma. Moral injury is global. It may—but does not necessarily—arise from guilt about something one has done or one's inability or failure to act in a way one believes one should. It can be triggered by betrayal by one's command or comrades. It often entails a loss of trust and hope, and it might further be described as an injury to one's humanity.

Moral injury, as currently examined in scholarly, clinical, and therapeutic communities is related to but distinguished from: moral distress, experienced when one is uncertain or ambivalent about what should be done; moral conflict, when what is called for conflicts with other moral beliefs; and moral contradiction, when it is the case that satisfying one moral belief presents a contradiction with another that is also, perhaps equally, affirmed.

The scope of moral concern in war is much broader than the dilemma of the moral status of killing in war, simply stated, and moral injuries are sustained beyond commission of specific actions that would be immoral in a non-combat environment. Moral injuries arise from critical compromises to the webs of care and concern—and our access to them—that make meaningful and enriching social interaction possible. Such injuries result in malformed relationships, withdrawal, and the inability to form new attachments with others.

Moral injuries often entail emotional confusion and dysfunction. For example, in Phil Klay's story "Frago" in his book *Redeployment*, a member of the narrator's unit is enraged when discovering a torture chamber in the course of clearing a house of weapon caches and insurgents. Prior to this discovery, an unarmed inhabitant is injured, and the unit has the responsibility to provide medical aid and care to someone they soon learn is responsible for the anguish and suffering of others. Aristotle tells us that anger is an appropriate emotional response to injustice. In this respect, anger can move us to act justly, providing emotional fuel for the morally good. What is the "right" thing to do with the intense emotion of anger—utter rage—that the soldier in this story experiences? How and to what extent should it motivate and guide his actions? Should it be interrupted and suppressed in this case? What does repeated disruption of this morally appropriate emotional response do to a person's moral judgment and sense of themselves as a moral authority? War routinely presents irregular moral situations requiring one to be willing to kill (and perhaps justifiably motivated to do it), but also to

be obliged to save and avoid mortal harm while maintaining a thorough commitment to completing the mission. Repeated exposure to demands of this sort is psychologically and *morally* exhausting.

Dialogue and Reciprocity, Pathways to Moral Repair— Moral injuries often become apparent only after deployed service members return home. Once home, in a context that should be safe, veterans are susceptible to re-injury. Writing of *jus post bellum* (justice after war), Lieutenant General (U.S. Army, Retired) James M. Dubik describes the relation between Veterans and the communities to which they return in the following terms, “It’s not a matter of gratitude; it’s a matter of reciprocity.”¹ Reciprocity is a key component of social and moral existence, a form of exchange that is mutually beneficial or fitting. This notion has deep roots in human experience, ranging from ancient traditions of guest-friendship (illustrated in the *Iliad*) to the principle of ‘doing unto others as you would have them do unto you’ (a bedrock of some religious moral worldviews and a subject of critique in Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morality*).

In taking up these concerns, we wish to guard against the stereotype of returning service members as “broken” while recognizing that the response of the community to service members after war is potent and pregnant with moral risk. What does reciprocity look like in these distinctive cases? What are appropriate responses? What is a helpful way to respond to persons who are the most proximal causes of the activities of war—the persons who may feel the greatest weight of responsibility— even though such responsibility is arguably shared by the society that authorizes such engagements? And what do such persons expect and need from their command, their comrades, their most immediate and, in this, most intimate, communities?

Dialogue is a form of reciprocity that draws out and shares the wealth of insight into human experience that endows it with meaning. It is a necessary if not sufficient condition for expansion of and reintegration in the moral community. Engaging in dialogue about the experience of war and the profound ways in which war experience can be transformative extends opportunities to be plunged into a kind of doubt that comes only from confronting extraordinary ambiguity, when life hangs in the balance. Such doubt may be edifying and potentially ennobling because it provokes us in truly distinctive ways to search for answers.

Our programs are designed to open dialogue about these enduring human questions through close reading and discussion of key works from two genres in the humanities, treating war experiences both ancient and modern. Because Hunter is an academic institution, we wish to maximize opportunities for discussion participants to earn college credit for their participation, and we will have multiple options available to students with those interests. Because we also have a strong commitment to public service, we also want to provide freestanding opportunities for those unable to complete an entire college course.

To provide culminating experiences for all participants, we will organize additional

¹ James M. Dubik, “Foreword” to *Afterwar* by Nancy Sherman (Oxford University Press, 2015), p. xvi.

meetings in the form of public events featuring contemporary authors who address moral injury in service members returning from war. Each author provides a model for the use of humanistic practices in interpreting the texts selected for our program, and each developed their work dialogically through direct engagement with veterans' accounts of their own experiences. These dynamic and interactive sessions will allow participants to gain an even deeper appreciation for the application and extension of ideas raised in the smaller group setting. The larger public meetings will have the further benefit of creating opportunities for veterans and non-veterans to meet for discussion in the public square around the following topics.

A warrior ethos—Discussion of Homer's *Iliad* provides opportunities to explore the ancient Greek warrior ethos and its relation to the customary morality of its time. Discussants will attend to the anguish of Achilles and its interpretation in modern contexts as relevant to experiences of veterans of the Vietnam War as recounted in Dr. Jonathan Shay's *Achilles in Vietnam*. Shay, who is credited with introducing the term "moral injury" in the medical and mental health communities, models practices drawn from the disciplines of classics, philosophy, and literature to engage in close readings of the text, "using Homer like an ultraviolet lamp to see what is ordinarily invisible"² in war experience. Shay presents the narrative accounts of veterans in his programs at the VA Hospital with the same care and attention that humanities scholars extend to the texts they study. By putting the words of veterans in dialogue with Homer's poetic account of the Trojan War, Shay examines the complicated circuits of trust, care, and responsibility that are essential for the operation of the war machine. When, in the conduct of war, these circuits are fried, moral casualties ensue. Because trust, care, and responsibility are cornerstones of what we might regard as the moral framework that operates tacitly in social life, these injuries can have long-term consequences when service members return home. After reading and discussing Homer's *Iliad* and Dr. Shay's presentation of how it illuminates key features of moral injury, participants will have the opportunity to discuss their own ideas and experiences with Dr. Shay.

The good life before and after war—Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* will introduce participants to virtue ethics, including Aristotle's conception of the good person as one who, through habit, cultivates the dispositions, emotional responses, and deliberative capacities that enable him or her to choose how to act and live well. Included in this work are important discussions of friendship and the interesting idea of self-friendship, which inform Nancy Sherman's account of how moral transformation after war might be possible for veterans suffering from moral injury, particularly those returning from the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Sherman combines her experiences as a philosopher and expert in the areas of ancient philosophy and ethics with her training in psychoanalysis to provide vivid portraits of how moral injuries arise with impacts that, in the words of a Navy officer profiled in the book, travel "down, down, down" to the point

² Jonathan Shay, *Achilles In Vietnam* (New York: Scribner, 1994), p. 147.

at which one may experience “a complete severing [from one’s] previous life.”³ Sherman draws on ancient and modern moral philosophy and psychological research to elaborate how self-trust, self-hope, and self-empathy contribute to moral transformation and repair. She emphasizes the essential role of the community in responding to veterans in order to overcome the alienation of the “lived worlds” of warriors through moral engagement. This entails that we “do what we humans do best: recognize and acknowledge each other, and invoke and convoke community through our emotions and understanding.”⁴ Professor Sherman will visit Hunter to present her most recent work, *Afterwar*, and discuss it with participants. She will also share what she has learned from years of teaching veterans and those in training for military service.

Morality in relief—Phil Klay’s *Redeployment* is a collection of short stories told from a variety of perspectives of those deployed to Iraq, engaging readers in an imaginative journey through the arduous and at times dizzying moral terrain traversed by service members in the experience of war. In the story “Prayer in the Furnace,” a chaplain struggles with providing spiritual guidance for men who are both suffering and causing the suffering of others. Some of those he counsels may have committed war crimes. He reflects on his experience in a place where one atrocity begets another in a seemingly endless chain, writing in his journal, “I see mostly normal men, trying to do good, beaten down by horror, by the inability to quell their own rages, by their masculine posturing and their so-called hardness, their desire to be tougher, and therefore crueler, than their circumstance. And yet, I have this sense that this place is holier than back home.”⁵ Part of what spurs this unexpected comparison is that “back home” people are complacent and self-absorbed whereas in the theater of war, the moral weight of one’s actions constantly stands out in relief from the tedium of the maintenance of everyday life. Phil Klay, a veteran of Iraq and graduate of Hunter College’s MFA program, will return to Hunter for a public event during which he will discuss his book and questions engaged by the program participants. Among our curricular options for discussion programs participants will be courses that teach writing.

Moral transformation and repair—Discussion of Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morality* will allow participants to consider how moral concepts grow and evolve, not necessarily ‘naturally’—as some have assumed, as an extension of or counterpart to biological evolution—but rather as a result of human creativity and cultural interests. Of particular interest are Nietzsche’s ideas about how differing conceptions of what is good arise, and how such concepts are linked with our ideas about friends and enemies and the development of conscience and guilt. The connections between our emotional and moral lives are explored in detail by philosopher Jesse Prinz, who demonstrates in his *The Emotional Construction of Morals*, how philosophical moral psychology (including

³ Sherman, *Afterwar*, p. 158.

⁴ Sherman, *Afterwar*, p. 161.

⁵ Phil Klay, *Redeployment* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), p. 151.

Nietzsche's) develops this relation in ways that are relevant to contemporary cognitive science. Brett Litz, an academic clinical psychologist, has been working to more precisely define moral injury, understand its causes, and devise remedies. In multiple publications, Litz and his colleagues observe that moral injury leads to withdrawal and diminishes prospects for "life affirmation."⁶ They call for multi-disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches, but to date few humanists are contributing to this effort. In this final discussion segment, participants, in dialogue with Prinz and Litz, will explore the notion of "life affirmation"—a signature feature of Nietzsche's philosophy—and consider how it might spring from moral transformation.

A call for participation for the faculty/leader development seminar will be distributed in April 2016. Discussion program offerings will be announced in fall 2016, and public events will take place during the spring 2017 semester. A program web site will launch during the summer of 2016.

⁶ B. Litz, et. al., "Moral injury and Moral Repair in War Veterans: A preliminary model and intervention strategy," *Clinical Psychology Review* 29 (2009): 695-706, p. 701.