

Political Theology

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ypot20

Rethinking Responsibility: Moral Injury from War to Prison

Sarah C. Jobe

To cite this article: Sarah C. Jobe (2022) Rethinking Responsibility: Moral Injury from War to Prison, Political Theology, 23:4, 335-349, DOI: 10.1080/1462317X.2022.2064095

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/1462317X.2022.2064095

Published online: 04 May 2022.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 12

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=ypot20

POLITICAL THEOLOGY
2022, VOL. 23, NO. 4, 335–349
https://doi.org/10.1080/1462317X.2022.2064095

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Check for updates

Rethinking Responsibility: Moral Injury from War to Prison

Sarah C. Jobe

Duke University Divinity School, Durham, North Carolina, USA

ABSTRACT

A moral injury framework, adapted to the carceral context from veterans' affairs, challenges the concept of "crime" and why people commit them. Moral injury asserts that human begins are moral agents and that no one violates their own moral code lightly. Healing from moral injury requires individuals and communities to get curious about the matrix of social factors and individual choices involved in any given "crime," challenging both individual responsibility and social theory narrations of criminality. This article names the ways that theological and political concepts like sin and crime have been laminated together in the narratives upholding mass incarceration. The moral injury framework challenges the language of this laminated theo-political narrative at all three of its major loci: the naming of moral violation as sin/crime, of people as sinner/ criminals, and of the process of restoration as redemption/ rehabilitation thereby opening pathways toward new modes of both thought and practice.

KEYWORDS

Moral injury; prison; mass incarceration; crime; redemption; theology; PTSD

This article introduces the moral injury framework as a resource for thinking about wrongdoing and responsibility in the context of criminal justice. Adapted to the carceral context from veterans' affairs, the moral injury framework challenges both the concept of "crime" and why people commit them by claiming that all people are moral agents and that no one violates their moral code lightly. I will first review the concept and practice of moral injury as it has developed in the context of war veterans, show how it can be usefully applied in the context of incarcerated people from within my own practice as a prison chaplain, and finally, articulate how a moral injury framework refuses the conceptual lamination of sin with crime, sinners with criminals, and redemption with rehabilitation. The article concludes with a call to the reader to get curious about the conditions under which we have each participated in the structural factors that cloud moral decision-making and supported the lamination of our theological and political narratives in ways that uphold incarceration as an appropriate response to rifts in the social fabric.

Moral injury in the context of war

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, American soldiers returned home from campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan suffering from nightmares and flashbacks, struggling with persistent anxiety, fear, anger, and depression, and bearing up under physical indicators of

CONTACT Sarah C. Jobe Sarah.jobe@duke.edu
© 2022 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

ongoing stress such as headaches, trouble sleeping, heart palpitations, and panic attacks. Many of these soldiers were diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Indeed, PTSD has been acknowledged as one of the signature wounds of these campaigns.[1] As a diagnosis, PTSD acknowledges the ongoing psychological impacts of direct or indirect exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violation.[2] In other words, PTSD is about *exposure* to traumatic events. Yet many of these veterans pushed back against the PTSD diagnosis insisting that it was not what they had seen or what had been done to them that was keeping them up at night; rather, they were haunted by what they themselves had done when deployed. They were struggling with guilt and shame, not first and foremost with traumatic exposure.[3]

The soldiers who said this had not committed war crimes or stepped outside of the bounds of duty. They were struggling with precisely the moments when their duty as a soldier demanded that they do something they thought was wrong. These campaigns were marked by the way in which the lines between enemy combatants and civilians were blurred.[4] Soldiers were asked to treat children as if they might be carrying a bomb … because sometimes they were. Soldiers found themselves in the ethically ambiguous situation in which their orders, their own self-preservation instincts, and their desire to protect the lives of their peers could come at the cost of shooting a child.[5] As social workers, psychologists, and chaplains in the Veterans Affairs (VA) system tried to take seriously the moral struggle they were hearing from soldiers, they agreed that PTSD was inadequate to describe the moral wrestling and attendant physical symptoms being experienced by these veterans,[6] and the concept of moral injury emerged.

Moral injury is a concept still in development, and no one definition adequately captures the full psychological, political, and spiritual breadth of the concept.[7] In the moral injury support groups that I lead in prison, we say that moral injury is what happens when you feel trapped or forced into violating your own moral code. By moral code, we mean one's own deeply held beliefs and values, noting that at times those values will overlap with legal or religious codes and at times they might be in tension with religious rules or laws. As one surveys the literature and listens to veterans, one finds that moral injury tends to occur when the following dynamics are in play: a person felt they had no good choices in a high-stakes situation in which there was both institutional let-down and factors that actively clouded ethical reasoning.

The example of the soldier taking a shot at a child in Afghanistan continues to be illustrative. In the moment at which one must discern whether or not to pull the trigger, the soldier faces a choice between placing himself and his peers at risk of injury or death while taking the shot could result in serious harm or death to the approaching child. The situation is high-stakes in that lives are on the line. The situation

[1]Tanielian and Jaycox, *Invisible Wounds of War*. 3–18.
[2]APA, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, 5th ed.
[3]Brock and Lettini, *Soul Repair,* 60–4.
[4]Litz et al., "Moral injury and Moral Repair," 696–8.
[5]Kinghorn, "Combat Trauma and Moral Fragmentation," 57–8.
[6]Drescher et al., "An Exploration of the Viability and Usefulness," 8–13.
[7]The definition, description, and history of development of moral injury are somewhat contested. No one definition or origin is entirely agreed upon in the field. For a concise overview of the range of definitions see Kelle, *The Bible and Moral Injury,* 20–36. For a brief history of the concept that dates to Vietnam rather than Iraq/Afghanistan see Kinghorn, "Combat Trauma and Moral Fragmentation," 60–2.

is inescapable in that there is no way for the soldier to extricate himself from the situation that might not also cause harm. Inaction on the soldier's part jeopardizes his own life and the lives of his fellow soldiers. The ongoing stressors of deployment and the immediate threat to safety act as factors that cloud moral reasoning, and those might be exacerbated by conditions such as noise, limited visibility, exhaustion, pre-existing mental health diagnoses, use of drugs and alcohol, or previous traumatic exposure. Finally, the burden of this decision has been placed on the soldier by the very country and military he trusted and esteemed enough to serve them with his life. Whether he is under direct orders to shoot or whether he has simply been placed in this moment of ethical ambiguity by his country and chain of command, the soldier is facing a moral dilemma because a society and institution he esteemed placed him in this untenable position.

People do not violate their own moral codes lightly, and when they feel trapped or forced into doing so, psychological injury can result.[8] Moral injury manifests similarly to PTSD with some important distinctives. Soldiers suffering from moral injury emphasize shame more than fear. They report a sense that they have lost their core identity and that they can no longer recognize themselves after what they have done. Additionally, they are left with a deep inability to trust the institutions that they once held dear. This is because institutions, systems, and legitimate authorities are part of what create the conditions for moral injury.[9]

Moral injury in the context of crime

How moral injury might occur on a battlefield is clear enough, but I am a prison chaplain. I learned about moral injury while doing a year of Clinical Pastoral Education at a VA hospital while I continued to spend most of my time in my regular chaplaincy position at a minimum custody women's prison. As I listened to soldiers expressing deep shame about their own actions mixed with anger at the systems that created the conditions for those actions and baffled discouragement about what they could have done differently, I thought, over and over again, about incarcerated women.

I thought about women who had found themselves trapped in abusive marriages who had ultimately fought back and killed their batterers. I thought of all the times those women would sit in my office sick with regret over taking the life of another person and yet, twenty years into a life sentence, still feel confused about exactly what they should have done instead.[10]

I thought about women who had worked minimum wage jobs at rates that flatly cannot provide for a family.[11] I can see them in my office, shoulders slumped in resigned frustration as they describe the bind of having felt unable to reach out for help without risking social services taking their children. These women ultimately chose to sell pills, kite checks, or engage in prostitution, actions they believed and believe are wrong,

[8]Nash and Litz, "Moral Injury: A Mechanism," 367.
[9]Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam;* and Shay, *Odysseus in America.*
[10]I am drawing on a decade of clinical pastoral experience as a prison chaplain in a women's minimum custody facility. The stories I share are representative of stories that I have heard with such repetition that they have become archetypes. For more on the criminalization of women's self-defense see Leonard, *Convicted Survivors;* Jones, *Women Who Kill;* Jobe, "Reading Jael's Story in a Women's Prison."
[11]For a structural, political, and historical analysis of this dynamic see Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Drugs* or Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor.*

because they could not see another way to keep their families provisioned and intact. These same women are now up at night, coping with headaches and high blood pressure, and wracked with shame that the very choices they made to protect their children now mean that they are in prison and their children are struggling without them.[12]

As I have listened to "criminals" tell the stories of their "crimes," I have seen the dynamics of moral injury named repeatedly: people in high-stakes situations, faced with tightly bound and morally ambiguous choices, deeply ashamed of the choices they ultimately made, with no idea how to get out from under the weight of that shame to start something new.[13] I have also seen the way that the criminal justice system is structured to compound and perpetuate the very conditions that create moral injury in the first place. Moral injury occurs when systems, institutions, and legitimate authorities make it difficult for an individual to do what is right, in her own eyes or according to laws, social norms, or shared moral codes. Yet America's criminal justice system tries, convicts, and sentences *individuals* – at most with a few co-defendants – with no mechanism by which to acknowledge systemic or institutional responsibility in the meshwork of any given legal violation. Healing from a moral injury can only happen when a person accepts some percentage of responsibility for an act while truthfully acknowledging the other responsible parties that created the conditions for the moral transgression. The plea process insists instead that a person claim either full responsibility by pleading guilty or claim no responsibility at all by pleading not guilty and forcing a trial. Moral injury happens when a person transgresses his own moral code, causing a crisis in identity and self-recognition, i.e., a person can no longer recognize himself because he never thought he could do what he has done. Whereas a moral injury framework insists that this identity crisis is evidence of the remaining moral agency inherent in every person, the sentencing process takes the moment of violation and makes it the primary identity of the convicted person. "Murderer, rapist, drug dealer, prostitute" become the nouns of a person, turning regretted action into descriptive label and placing a criminal identity in the identity gap created by moral violation. And yet, these supposed "murderers, rapists, drug dealers, and prostitutes" are up at night, haunted by what they did, struggling with how to ever move past it.

While comparing the plight of veterans to "inmates" might itself be considered a morally ambiguous correlation, the parallel dynamics and overlapping symptoms that I saw in my chaplaincy practice were undeniable. I began sharing the definition of moral injury in one-on-one pastoral care when women came to process guilt and shame, and I watched as women's eyes widened and they began to nod their assent vigorously as they experienced that first healing taste of "being seen." Women began asking for a group in which they could intentionally explore the things they had done, both crimes and non-criminal moral violations, in the hopes of finding a way out of crushing shame into responsibility and reclamation of moral agency.[14] In order to measure the

[12]Sered and Norton-Hawk, *Can't Catch a Break*, 126–40.

[13]For those without direct relationships to people who have found themselves engaged in what gets labeled criminal behavior, the rich tradition of prison memoirs provides a window into the complexity of these stories. Some suggestions: Senghor, *Writing my Wrongs;* Rideau, *In the Place of Justice*; Burton and Lynn, *Becoming Ms. Burton*; Williams, *Blue Rage, Black Redemption*; Kerman, *Orange is the New Black*.

[14]I co-developed this small group curriculum called *Facing Ourselves: Understanding and Increasing Compassionate Self-Forgiveness* with LCSW Maria Rau in consultation with clinical psychologist Lisa Jobe Shields with the support of Interfaith Prison Ministry for Women under the leadership of Executive Director Jennifer Jackson.

impact of the group for program evaluation purposes, I worked with clinical psychologist Lisa Jobe Shields to modify the Moral Injury Symptoms Scale (MISS) to fit a non-military population. The results were startling: the women who chose to participate in these moral injury groups had higher instances of moral injury symptoms than veterans with PTSD.[15] At the end of the group process, women showed clinically significant improvement in the reduction of symptoms measured by the MISS: guilt, shame, moral concerns, religious struggles, loss of religious faith/hope, loss of meaning/purpose, difficulty forgiving, loss of trust, and self-condemnation.[16] This program evaluation data suggests both that moral injury is a fitting framework for understanding the dynamics of some crimes and that healing from the moral violations leading up to and embedded within the criminal justice system is possible.

Resisting the disappearance of theology and politics in talk of healing

While I am encouraged by these results, I want to pause before moving any further and name a risk inherent in talk of symptoms, psycho-educational curricula, and symptom reduction. Warren Kinghorn has written compellingly about the way that a focus on symptoms in addressing trauma can make it seem as if trauma is located and healed in the individual.[17] He describes how soldiers' complaints about the impacts of the Vietnam War on their persons achieved recognition within the official diagnosis of PTSD in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III)* precisely by being stripped of the political and social context of Vietnam. As Kinghorn puts it, the "context" and the "morally salient experiences and judgements of Post-Vietnam Syndrome were buried in and by the construct of PTSD."[18] The political and theological dimensions of moral injury can disappear into the medical language of symptoms. Even as one re-reads the preceding paragraph, one might imagine that moral injury is a problem residing in the soldier or incarcerated individual that can be tested and healed without engaging the Department of Justice, the Bureau of Prisons, or the church.

The rest of this article will describe the process of healing from moral injury and how the lessons learned in that healing process about who people are and how moral violations occur challenge regnant concepts of criminality – as both a theologically freighted concept and an institutional and political phenomenon. In describing the very granular process of healing individuals, their social systems, and their conceptual frameworks within these support groups, I will attempt to refuse the siloing of the clinical, political, and theological away from one another for at least two reasons. First, I believe that one of the primary theoretical gifts of the moral injury framework is its display of the

[15]Koenig et al., "The Moral Injury Symptoms Scale – Military Version," 249. Koenig reports an MISS score of 223.6 (SD = 61.6) in a study of veterans with PTSD. In 23 women who have self-selected for moral injury support groups, there was an average MISS of 274.1 (SD = 40.0) before beginning the group process. After the course, the average MISS was reduced to 194.3 (SD = 35.4). The collection of this data was not part of an academic study but for program evaluation purposes, thus not regulated by a research review board. Program participants in *Facing Ourselves* were invited to take the MISS before and after the class to evaluate the efficacy of the curriculum and their own personal development within the class experience.

[16]Of note is that with only 23 participants and 18 completers, the reduction in symptoms still meets the bar for statistical significance. I take this as encouraging data and reason for further formal study outside the realm of program evaluation but not yet as grounds for claims of statistical significance.

[17]Kinghorn, "Challenging the Hegemony of the Symptom," 644–62.

[18]Ibid., 658.

interconnections between social systems and individual decisions, physical symptoms and spiritual wounds, and political life and moral reasoning in any moment of violation, whether that violation is labeled a crime or an act of war. Secondly, I will insist on naming the overlay of the political and the theological onto the stories of incarcerated individuals because that overlay of political and theological narratives is a part of how the carceral system continues to grow and thrive in the United States.[19]

In describing the active role of Christians in creating America's first prisons, Jennifer Graber explains that in colonial America, "Whereas not all sins were crimes, all crimes were sins."[20] The conceptual overlay of sin and crime has justified and encouraged Christian participation in America's criminal justice system since its inception. Graber documents the Quaker influence not only on the creation of the Pennsylvania system at Eastern State Penitentiary but also on the New York system at Newgate.[21] She also documents the intentional turn away from Quaker chaplains by administrators in New York's system and toward Baptist and Calvinist clergy for the roles of prison chaplains expressly because their theologies like total depravity and God's use of punishment to refine sinners could provide a supporting conceptual framework for the prison's stark and punitive practices.[22]

Tanya Erzen takes Graber's work further into American history by documenting the role of Christians and their theologies in the growth and proliferation of prisons into the system of mass incarceration that began in the 1980s and continues today. Combining historical analysis with ethnographic interviewing inside Christian prison programs in six states, Erzen explains the way that language slips between the theological and political so that "sin" is understood to mean "crime" or "criminal thinking and actions."[23] Time spent in prison affords "sinners" or "criminals" the opportunity at "repentance" or "rehabilitation" if they are only willing to avail themselves of the time and opportunities provided.[24] The Christian story of redemption from sin to a life with God becomes laminated onto the state's story that prison offers the chance for criminals to turn from crime and become law-abiding, tax-paying citizens. The lamination of the two stories onto one another does reinforcing work for both narratives.[25] When the truth of one narrative falters, the logic of the other can hold and smooth the dissonance.

The moral injury framework challenges the language of this laminated theo-political narrative at all three of its major loci: the naming of moral violation as sin/crime, of people as sinner/criminals, and of the process of restoration after moral violation as redemption/rehabilitation. Healing from moral injury begins with the insistent claim that every person is a moral agent and that no one violates their own moral code lightly. Acceptance of this claim unsettles narratives about who is locked up. If people behind bars are not first and foremost "dangerous inmates," "hardened criminals," or

[19]Erzen, *God in Captivity*; see also Dubler and Lloyd, *Break Every Yoke.*
[20]Graber, *Furnace of Affliction,* 7.
[21]Ibid., 15–102.
[22]Ibid., 45–71.
[23]Erzen, *God in Captivity,* 22.
[24]Ibid., 19–26.
[25]Mahmood, *Politics of Piety,* 118. While Mahmood is not addressing the American context or the carceral, I am drawing on her for this concept of the "lamination" of the theological and political together. She is addressing the lamination of Islamic and nationalist discourses in Egypt, but I find her theoretical work on the benefits to both state and religious bodies of laminating stories in this way to be applicable to the political and theological story-telling patterns of American incarceration and Christianity.

"threats to society," then how does one explain the egregious acts of moral violation that many have committed? Healing from moral injury requires that we all get curious about the conditions under which a person might do something as serious as violate their own moral code. As we get curious, we find a matrix in which individual decisions are being made in a pressure cooker of social, economic, and political factors, and the moral injury framework insists that those individual decisions and broader, structural factors must all be apportioned a percentage of responsibility for any given violation. The rest of this paper will describe the support group process that I have used to do the above reframing as well as specific tactics that show promise for opening pathways to restoration in the body, psyche, and wider communities of anyone who finds himself facing the impacts of having participated in harm.

Healing political and moral wounds (one person at a time)

In 2018, I worked with LCSW Maria Rau to develop a small group curriculum called *Facing Ourselves* that translated moral injury principles from a veteran's affairs context to the prison context in which we worked. Within the existing field of moral injury studies, we intentionally drew from the theological perspectives of Rita Nakashima Brock and Gabriella Lettini, the pastoral approach of Larry Kent Graham, and the clinical work of Brett Litz and others in the development of adaptive disclosure as a treatment modality.[26] Those familiar with the field will notice that these are distinct approaches to moral injury that are sometimes even described as having competing frameworks. Yet our experience with incarcerated women as chaplain and social worker indicated that women were suffering at the intersection of the moral, political, and psychological, and we were committed to holding those dimensions together in our approach to moral injury.

Drawing from this variety of approaches, *Facing Ourselves* takes people through a four-step process of telling the story of having violated their own moral code, getting curious about the conditions that pressed such serious actions, claiming or re-claiming moral agency and values, and making amends. Each of these steps keeps the individual intentionally embedded in her social context, and the process is intentionally wholistic, working at the levels of mind, body, and spirit simultaneously. But perhaps most important to say at the beginning, is that our entire curriculum rests on the idea that curiosity is a guide on the journey out of debilitating and isolating shame to the reclamation of responsibility and moral agency in community. From day one, we invite women to take up a set of "curiosity questions" at any point in which they notice the more familiar feelings of judgment, shame, hurt, or panic. Influenced by Larry Kent Graham, we define a commitment to curiosity as "a disciplined habit of attuning to what is curious, exciting, interesting, and challenging to me *rather than* what is disappointing, frustrating, or what 'should' have been."[27] I name and define curiosity as the grounding posture of our approach at this point in the paper to invite you, as reader, to intentionally join in that posture in your engagement of the material that follows.[28]

[26]Brock and Lettini, *Soul Repair;* Graham, *Moral Injury;* Litz et al., *Adaptive Disclosure*.
[27]Graham, *Moral Injury,* 33-35, 109-117. While we developed the language of "curiosity questions," we drew heavily from concepts in Graham's description of what he calls "collaborative conversation" and "collaborative questions."
[28]Goto, *Taking On Practical Theology,* xvii-xix. Goto argues for breaking traditional academic modes of using the third person or at times first person plural and moving into the use of the second person for direct address of one's audience

Telling stories of violation

Judith Herman begins her foundational work *Trauma and Recovery,* with the assertion that, "Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims."[29] *Facing Ourselves* begins by inviting each participant to tell the story of what they did, first on paper through a guided "moral self-inventory" journal process, and then verbally in a facilitated small group of 5–8 people who will also share their stories of moral violation. This may sound like the beginning of virtually any psycho-educational curricula on virtually any topic, but I was startled to find that many women had never once been asked to tell their story within the entire process of their arrest, trial, and conviction. The arrest process begins with the reminder that "anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law." The fifth amendment of the United States Constitution protects a person from being compelled to admit anything that might convict them of a crime. While the trial and sentencing process encourages a person not to admit any sort of guilt, the carceral processes of promotion from maximum to minimum custody or being granted things like parole, take the entirely opposite approach and encourage incarcerated people to take on full guilt and responsibility for their crimes. Any honest statement about the conditions surrounding a crime is taken as a sign that a person is trying to avoid responsibility.[30] Within the carceral context, telling one's own story of having done wrong in the context of what was going on at the time, is a courageous and counter-cultural moral act.

There are two important caveats as to how women are invited to tell their stories in this class. First, we invite women to release the language of "crime" and "sin" as the primary descriptors of "what they did" for the duration of the class. The language of "crime" suggests the violation of rules and regulations external to one's self. Similarly, the language of "sin" often connotes violations that have been pre-determined within a particular religious system. Any given individual has rarely been involved in the creation of those laws or religious systems, and one is encouraged to follow those laws and rules whether one agrees with them or not. Yet moral injury insists that people experience the physical symptoms of stress and anxiety, debilitating shame, and loss of identity because of violating *their own* moral code, whether not that aligns with a legal or religious code external to themselves. One's own moral code might be significantly shaped by law or religion, but the creative way that an individual synthesizes these influences into his or her own positive moral identity is not exhausted by religion and law. The individual's identity as a positive moral agent is what has been disappeared by war, incarceration, and the supporting narratives of these social phenomena. One's identity and particularity as a moral agent is what must be reclaimed after moral injury.

This is a vitally important point. The criminal justice process focuses on the violation of law while painting the person who violated the law as a callous, intentional, and sometimes sociopathic threat to the social order, thus justifying their incarceration. The

particularly when addressing subject matter in which both author and readers are implicated. I do this here in order to invite us as a scholarly community to wonder about our own implication in the social harms described in this paper, following the same process by which incarcerated women come to claim their own contextualized responsibility for harms done.

[29]Herman, *Trauma and Recovery,* 1.

[30]Bower et al., "The Truth Will Set You Free," 79–112.

language and logic of criminality has no space for the idea that a person might have violated her own moral code and had her own morality violated in ways that sometimes overlap with crime or sin but more often go unrecognized by the judgments and narratives of formal legal and religious systems. In setting aside the language of crime and sin as the best descriptors of "what happened," we welcome a wider breadth of harms to be acknowledged in the story, and we begin the process of acknowledging that incarcerated individuals are struggling not primarily from having violated a legality or morality exterior to themselves but from having violated their own beliefs about what is right, their own intrinsic goodness.

Secondly, while *Facing Ourselves* ultimately focuses on agential trauma, i.e., harms perpetrated rather than harms experienced, the moral self-inventory process begins with reflection on acts a person has witnessed that they believe are wrong. The process then moves to naming acts that have been done against the individual that he or she believes were wrong. The person is invited to name what those experiences cost them and to name what remains within them that they are proud of or glad about after having survived those experiences. The moral self-inventory then guides the participant through a breathing exercise that aims to calm the nervous system before beginning a series of questions in which the person is invited to name times when they did something they ultimately believe was wrong. They are then invited to reflect both on what it cost them to perpetrate that action and on what strengths or qualities remains in them after the violation. This process begins to acknowledge the complexity of moral violations and blurs easy distinctions between "victims" and "offenders" that often pervade even alternative responses to crime like restorative justice processes.[31]

All of the above is recognizable as a form of "cognitive reframing," the healing that is possible in simply changing the way that one thinks about and talks about an experience.[32] Indeed, the Adaptive Disclosure method for treating moral injury relies on concepts from Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) while acknowledging that cognitive approaches alone have not been successful in treating moral injury.[33] Even when the focus of a session is story-telling (i.e., cognitive), *Facing Ourselves* begins and ends with some sort of body-based practice for calming the nervous system.[34] The individual work is set in a communal context in that the groups have been run in the prison chapel and have intentionally drawn on the resources from within the spiritual communities of the participants in some way each week. For instance, on the day that group members told their stories aloud, women were invited to color paper bookmarks while they waited for their peers to arrive. With freshly sharpened colored pencils, they illuminated words from *The Message* translation of 1 John 3:18-20: "My dear children, let's not just talk about love; let's practice real love. This is the only way we'll know we're living, truly

[31]While it is beyond the scope of this article to offer a full comparison between restorative justice and moral injury frameworks, the reader familiar with restorative justice will notice that some of the processes for understanding and contextualizing crime are similar. The disruption of the victim/offender binary is one of the most important challenges that moral injury has to offer to the field of restorative justice. For more on restorative justice frameworks see Howard Zehr, *Changing Lenses: Restorative Justice for Our Times* and Danielle Sered, *Until We Reckon: Violence, Mass Incarceration, and a Road to Repair.*

[32]For a variety of approaches to healing moral injury, including Cognitive Behavioral, Social-Functional, and various religious or ritual approaches see Joseph M. Currier, Kent D. Drescher, and Jason Nieusma, *Addressing Moral Injury in Clinical Practice.*

[33]Litz et al., *Adaptive Disclosure,* 6–18.

[34]Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score,* 205–348.

living, in God's reality. It's also the way to shut down debilitating self-criticism, even when there is something to it. For God is greater than our worried hearts and knows more about us than we do ourselves." The healing of psychological wounds through communal action (practicing real love) is placed in the realm of the Christian tradition by the biblical text itself. Rather than discussing the verses as "truth" to be accepted, participants are indirectly invited into the possibility of living in such a reality as they trace the invitation in colors they choose.

Getting curious about the conditions that promote violation

After being honest about the fact that one has engaged in an act of moral violation, the next step in the healing process is to get curious about the conditions surrounding that act. If one takes seriously that no one violates their own moral code lightly, it begs the question, "Why would one ever engage in a serious violation like murder, child abuse, or theft at all?" The criminal justice system implicitly offers the answer that one breaks the law because one is a bad person – criminally negligent, a repeat offender, someone who committed harm with premeditation and intent. Many of the women in our groups have internalized this logic and often begin the sessions on responsibility fiercely claiming 100% of the responsibility for their moral violations, with the attendant assumptions about their own immorality and fundamental sinfulness that undergird such an "all or nothing" responsibility model.

It takes only a small dose of curiosity to disrupt the logic that women commit crimes because they are criminals or bad people. I start to ask questions like the following:

- Who were you living with at the time?
- Where was the father of the children you were trying to feed?
- Did you have a job? How much were you getting paid?
- Did you ever ask social services or the police for help? Did you get any help from them?

Each woman has before her a paper plate and six balls of colored playdough. The circular plate acts as a pie chart, representing the fullness of the responsibility for the moral violation. Most women quickly spread one color over the entire plate, representing their own assumption of 100% of the blame. We use playdough, however, because as we begin to ask questions about the circumstances surrounding the violation, we realize that the one color needs to be squished back a bit to make space for the other individuals, social structures, accidents, employers, systemic discriminations, and belief systems that made it so difficult for a woman to imagine a way forward that did not involve some level of harm to herself or others. As we look together at the circumstances that created the conditions for moral violation, the black hole in the middle of a woman's identity, that moment at which she did the "unthinkable" suddenly makes sense. Only then is there space to consider what might need to change in society and in the individual in order to enable different action in the future.

I have said already that moral injury occurs when individual decisions are being made in a pressure cooker of social, economic, and political factors and that the moral injury framework insists that both individuals and broader, structural factors must all be

apportioned a percentage of responsibility for any given violation. Structural factors that surface most frequently as having created the conditions in which someone had no good choices include the inability to makes ends meet working low wage jobs while taking care of multiple dependent family members, repeated experience that calling the police or social services when one needs help is likely to end in either one's own detention or the loss of one's children, and both religious and economic pressure to stay in homes that are violent. These repeated structural factors then interact with events that are also patterned and repeated: treatment for injuries from a car wreck leading to an opioid addiction, the tragic loss of a loved one catapulting someone into a year of intensive depression and drug use, or experiences of childhood abuse leading to drug use in early adolescence. Finally, in some cases the above structural and event-based factors have been exacerbated by social factors like anti-black policing practices, the targeting of queer youth in their families and religious communities, and gender norms that reward male aggression. A moral injury framework presses us to see the ways in which we are all implicated in any given violation of the social order by having lived within, tacitly supported, voted for, or even benefited from the policies, structures, and biases named above.

(Re)claiming moral agency and making amends

The second half of the curriculum moves from naming moral violation and claiming contextualized responsibility alongside other actors to the process of healing the individual through reclaiming moral agency and healing the social fabric through making amends. This is the part of the process that might be named redemption, rehabilitation, or restoration, but again, the naming and framing matters.

Having violated one's own morals does not mean that one's morality ceases to exist, even if the criminal justice process has suggested that to a person. Reclaiming moral agency means giving a person who took a life the space to say that she believed and believes that murder is wrong. Sometimes a violation of a value can be the first moment that a person realizes that they valued the thing at all. Reclamation of moral agency means giving a person space to name that she never knew that she valued safety and stability, having never been given those as a child, until her own incarceration meant those were taken from her children. Her own moral injury in having participated in the violation of her children's safety and stability through her own process of being incarcerated is data that safety and stability are part of her core value system. *Facing Ourselves* takes people through a number of exercises to help them name their individual, familial, religious, and social core values and beliefs. It is precisely from this steady place of self-knowledge and moral integrity, rather than desperation and need, that a person can begin to make amends for the wrong she has done in a way that neither causes additional harm nor overlooks the harms done against the wrong-doer.

In *Facing Ourselves,* we say that we cannot change, undo, or forget the past, but we can repair, restore, and redirect for the future. This is the process of making amends. Sometimes making amends involves apologizing directly to people one has harmed. Larry Kent Graham names how sometimes the moral violation was significant enough that apologizing and asking for forgiveness prior to taking practical steps to repair what was broken

can be a further "moral affront to the gravity of harm we caused or contributed to."[35] In those cases one might need to make "practical amends" like paying restitution, going to mediation, resolving custody disputes, or repaying a debt. Apologies and practical amends are sometimes all that can be achieved in situations where it would be unhealthy for either party in a relationship to continue interacting with one another, but in some instances apologies and practical amends are the beginning of the hard work of rebuilding relationships. Finally, it is sometimes simply not possible to apologize to those we harmed, restore relationships, or repair everything we have broken. In those cases, we follow in the traditions of NA and AA in pursuing "living amends." Living amends is when one commits to a whole new way of life, dedicating one's life, time, and work to the betterment of others and society in honor of a violation and in pursuit of a society in which such violation is less likely to occur.[36]

Until recently, I had thought of "living amends" as something of an "amends of last resort," the type of action one might take when one could not actually repair and restore what was broken. But I have come to believe that living amends might actually be at the heart of the moral injury framework, as those who have been most impacted by and implicated in social and moral violation become agents for positive change in precisely the social structures that contributed to the violation in the first place. To return to the context of Veteran's Affairs, Chaim Shatan describes how Vietnam veterans seeking to make peace with their experiences in Vietnam not only gathered together in "rap groups" to share stories and process experiences, they also raised money to support hospitals in Vietnam, published books of poetry about their experiences, ran peer-to-peer drug abuse rehab programs, and developed programs for veterans in need of legal assistance.[37] I have watched incarcerated women catch and enact visions for changing criminal law, running re-entry homes, speaking out about domestic violence, and becoming peer support specialists. I have watched them enact a commitment to speak honestly in public, in the church, and in their workplaces about their own criminal records, risking further punitive response for the sake of changing social assumptions about criminality. These living amends are the stuff of redemption, rehabilitation, and restoration.

Conclusion

I suspect that our corporate ability to participate in the renewed forms of life being imagined by people healing from moral injury will depend entirely upon our willingness to get curious about the conditions under which we have permitted and supported the lamination of our theological and political narratives in support of the carceral. This article has suggested that when we bracket, for a moment, the laminated, theo-political language of criminal/sinners and sin/crime we might be opened up to different – perhaps more effective and more true – ideas about how to address social violations. The language and framing of the questions impact the answers that one can imagine.

For instance, if one is asking, "How are criminals rehabilitated from committing crimes?" one might conceive of "incarceration" as a legitimate answer. If one is asking,

[35]Graham, *Moral Injury,* 123.
[36]Burton and Lynn, *Becoming Ms. Burton,* 127–33.
[37]Shatan, "The Grief of Soldiers," 649–50.

"How are sinners redeemed from sin?" one might imagine a response that somehow involves the person of Christ but can occur inside of a prison just as easily as it can without. The process of redemption demands no particular structural or political changes whatsoever. But in the moral injury framework the question sounds more like, "How do people who are trapped in systems that create conditions in which they might choose to violate their own moral codes and the shared values of society become restored to one another, themselves, and God?" When one asks the question that way, different answers emerge. They demand that we each claim our own percentage of the responsibility for the social violations we are accustomed to calling crimes. We each must attempt to reclaim our own moral agency and values in the face of having participated in structures and institutions that placed people in untenable situations. Perhaps we might even find ourselves curious about if the carceral system as it stands effectively contributes to the goal of restoration to God, self, and others after violation has occurred. If it does not, are we brave enough to name the truth of that failure, take our portion of the responsibility, and make living amends toward creating institutions and social structures in which it is easier do to what's right?

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Sarah Jobe is a prison educator through Duke University Divinity School and a prison chaplain through Interfaith Prison Ministry for Women.

Bibliography

American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. 5th ed. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 2013.

Bower, Stephanie, P. Raymond, Emily Artiano, M. William, and Ben Pack. "The Truth Will Set You Free: Reflections on the Rhetoric of Insight, Responsibility, and Remorse in Rhetoric for the Board of Parole Hearings." *Reflections* 19, no. 1 (2019): 79–112.

Brock, Rita Nakashima, and Gabriella Lettini. *Soul Repair: Recovering from Moral Injury after War*. Boston: Beacon, 2012.

Burton, Susan, and Cari Lynn. *Becoming Ms. Burton: From Prison to Recovery to Leading the Fight for Incarcerated Women*. New York: The New Press, 2017.

Currier, Joseph M., Kent D. Drescher, and Jason Nieusma. *Addressing Moral Injury in Clinical Practice*. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2021.

Drescher, Kent, David Foy, Caroline Kelly, A. Leshner, A. Schulz, and Brett Litz. "An Exploration of the Viability and Usefulness of the Construct of Moral Injury in War Veterans." *Traumatology* 17, no. 1 (2011): 8–13.

Dubler, Joshua, and Vincent Lloyd. *Break Every Yoke: Religion, Justice, and the Abolition of Prisons*. New York: Oxford, 2020.

Erzen, Tanya. *God in Captivity: The Rise of Faith-Based Prison Ministries in the Age of Mass Incarceration*. Boston: Beacon, 2017.

Goto, Courtney T. *Taking on Practical Theology: The Idolization of Context and the Hope of Community*. Boston: Brill, 2018.

Graber, Jennifer. *The Furnace of Affliction: Prisons and Religion in Antebellum America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2011.
Graham, Larry Kent. *Moral Injury: Restoring Wounded Souls*. Nashville: Abingdon, 2017.
Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. New York: Basic Books, 1992. Reprint, New York: Basic Books, 2015.
Hinton, Elizabeth. *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America*. Cambridge: Harvard, 2016.
Jobe, Sarah. "Reading Jael's Story in a Women's Prison." *The Christian Century*, Oct. 1. https://www.christiancentury.org/article/critical-essay/reading-jael-s-story-women-s-prison, 2018.
Jones, Ann. *Women Who Kill*. New York: The Feminist Press, 2009.
Kelle, Brad E. *The Bible and Moral Injury: Reading Scripture Alongside War's Unseen Wounds*. Nashville: Abingdon, 2020.
Kerman, Piper. *Orange is the New Black: My Year in a Women's Prison*. New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2016.
Kinghorn, Warren. "Challenging the Hegemony of the Symptom: Reclaiming Context in PTSD and Moral Injury." *The Journal of Medicine and Philosophy: A Forum for Bioethics and Philosophy of Medicine* 45, no. 6 (December 2020): 644–662.
Kinghorn, Warren. "Combat Trauma and Moral Fragmentation: A Theological Account of Moral Injury." *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 32, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2012): 57–74.
Koenig, Harold G., Donna Ames, Nagy A. Youssef, John P. Oliver, Fred Volk, Ellen J. Teng, Kerry Haynes, et al. "The Moral Injury Symptoms Scale – Military Version." *Journal of Religion and Health* 57 (2018): 249–265.
Leonard, Elizabeth Dermody. *Convicted Survivors: The Imprisonment of Battered Women Who Kill*. Albany: SUNY, 2002.
Litz, Brett, Leslie Lebowitz, Matt J. Gray, and William P. Nash. *Adaptive Disclosure: A New Treatment for Military Trauma, Loss, and Moral Injury*. New York: Guilford, 2016.
Litz, Brett T., Nathan Stein, Eileen Delaney, Leslie Lebowitz, William P. Nash, Caroline Silva, and Shira Maguen. "Moral Injury and Moral Repair in war Veterans: A Preliminary Model and Intervention Strategy." *Clinical Psychology Review* 29 (2009): 695–706.
Mahmood, Saba. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.
Nash, William P., and Brett T. Litz. "Moral Injury: A Mechanism for War-Related Psychological Trauma in Military Family Members." *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review* 16 (2013): 365–375.
Rideau, Wilbert. *In the Place of Justice: A Story of Punishment and Deliverance*. New York: Vintage Books, 2010.
Senghor, Shaka. *Writing My Wrongs: Life, Death, and Redemption in an American Prison*. New York: Convergent, 2013.
Sered, Danielle. *Until We Reckon: Violence, Mass Incarceration, and a Road to Repair*. New York: The New Press, 2019.
Sered, Susan Starr, and Maureen Norton-Hawk. *Can't Catch a Break: Gender, Jail, Drugs, and the Limits of Personal Responsibility*. Oakland: University of California, 2014.
Shatan, Chaim F. "The Grief of Soldiers: Vietnam Combat Veterans' Self-Help Movement." *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 43, no. 4 (July 1973): 640–653.
Shay, Jonathan. *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*. New York: Scribner, 1994.
Shay, Jonathan. *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming*. New York: Scribner, 2002.
Tanielian, Terri, and Lisa H. Jaycox. *Invisible Wounds of War: Psychological and Cognitive Injuries, Their Consequences, and Services to Assist Recovery*. Santa Monica: RAND, 2008.
Van der Kolk, Bessel. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. New York: Penguin, 2015.

Wacquant, Loic. *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity*. Durham: Duke, 2009.
Williams, Stanley Tookie. *Blue Rage, Black Redemption*. New York: Touchstone, 2004.
Zehr, Howard. *Changing Lenses: Restorative Justice for Our Times, 25th Anniversary Edition*. Independence, MO: Herald Press, 2015.