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THE COMBATANT-INSTITUTION PROXIMITY FRAMEWORK AS A TOOL FOR
UNDERSTANDING MORAL INJURY IN WAR

Master's Thesis in Philosophy

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Prologue

First Lieutenant (1LT) James Johnson was the commander of a helicopter platoon in the Vietnam War.* As a platoon commander, Lieutenant Johnson would have been just 23 to 25 years old and in charge of about eight aircraft, such as United States Army UH-1 “Huey” gunships, and tasked with executing brutal combat missions in combat.¹ One day, while out flying one such mission in the Vietnamese countryside, Lieutenant Johnson and his formation approached their intended target. As they got nearer and the target came into view, it appeared to be an ordinary village, peaceful and lacking any signs of enemy activity. While his own subordinates tensely awaited the go-ahead to carry out the attack or retreat from the town, Lieutenant Johnson radioed back to higher command. Likely a Major or Lieutenant Colonel, the person issuing his mission orders was endowed with significant authority. Lieutenant Johnson explained to his leadership that the target appeared to be civilians, expecting clarification or even an order abort this mission. His leadership dismissed his worry without consideration and responded with the chilling reply: “*Waste them all.*”

Fifty or more years later, Lieutenant Johnson still lives every day with the moral injury that resulted from him and his platoon killing those people. As a young officer in the theater of war, he would not necessarily be privy to the full intelligence picture required to make decisions like the one that his superiors made when they issued that order. All that matters is Lieutenant Johnson’s perception and the imprint of violating a belief; he believed he helped carry out an order to kill an entire village of innocent people. James Johnson's suffering all these years was caused by the tremendous conflict between his actions and what he believed was morally right. His suffering extends beyond contemplating a moral conundrum of his past from time to

¹ (Assault Helicopter Companies | Huey Vets, n.d.; Military Units, n.d.; VMI Class of 1966 Vietnam Oral History Project, n.d.)

*NOTE: This is a true story, as told by Brian Murphy, LCSW, MSW, in an interview. The veteran's identity has been protected, and the name and rank in this story are placeholders, not the real name or rank of the individual who experienced this. Brian Murphy is a therapist working for the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, including 6 years counseling combat veterans (B. Murphy, personal communication, October 21, 2024).

time. Lieutenant Johnson and other combat veterans have difficulty living with themselves, they often kill themselves as a result of their moral injuries, and they suffer lifelong depression, crippling loss of trust and loss of faith in themselves or authority (Drescher et al., 2011, p. 2; Litz et al., 2009, p. 697; Shay, 2014, pp. 182, 184). They become casualties of war, just the same as those who are physically wounded or killed in action.

Throughout this thesis, the reader should put aside hypotheticals about what combatants should or could do differently in situations that push their moral boundaries. The research will not analyze the power dynamic of young combatants executing orders from those appointed over them, nor will it evaluate their capacity to deny those orders amid combat when their lives are in jeopardy. **Regardless of how one believes individual morals are constructed, moral injury is a disruption of the moral framework of an individual** (Drescher et al., 2011, p. 1,2,4). Additionally, this work applies to combatants across a range of roles, from those serving in conventional combat positions to those in modern technological roles such as remotely piloted aircraft (RPA) operators. Here I am concerned specifically with moral injury as a fracturing wound that occurs when men and women at war are exposed to and commit violence of combat that conflicts with their deeply held personal morals.²

² All thoughts and opinions in this work are solely those of the author. This thesis in no way reflects the official opinions of the United States Military or any agency of the United States government.

Introduction

Though the term moral injury has only been formally named recently, it is not a new phenomenon but a profound and enduring repercussion of war throughout time—a manifestation of the human struggle to reconcile violence with morality (Shay, 2014, pp. 183–184; Wiinikka-Lydon, 2019, p. 177). The term emerged in the 1990’s to describe the suffering of combatants beyond physical trauma (Fleming, 2023, p. 199; Shay, 2014). Moral injury is a serious condition that causes extreme suffering, but it is primarily an invisible injury. The existence of such serious wounds originating from wartime service is an indicator that deeply held moral beliefs cannot be reconciled with morals set by institutions such as just war theory. This dissonance prompts my central research question: How does moral injury indicate that a combatant’s personal morals are irreconcilable with the actions required of them within war?

Institutions governing the ethical³ conduct of warfare, like just war theory, international humanitarian law, or law of armed conflict, are metaphorically distant from the individual, but something spans this gap. Between themselves and the institutions within which they are embedded, the individual combatant is engulfed in a sociocultural domain. Military hierarchical structures help shape the sociocultural space in which combatants operate. Leadership at all levels, and the culture cultivated by these leaders and structures, is, in turn, influenced by broader institutional and legal frameworks. In this way, the hierarchy does not stand apart from the institutions of war but actively interacts with and is shaped by them.

Structuring the above ideas into a cohesive framework forms the central argument of this work—that moral injury demonstrates metaphorical distance between the individual combatant and the institutions and laws that govern moral conduct within war. Driven by the research question, I aim to show that personal morals become irreconcilable due to this metaphorical distance—one that unveils itself throughout the thesis as relational distance within a sociocultural atmosphere, philosophical distance in the examination of institutions, and moral distance that may only become clear to an individual at the moment of a morally injurious event. In order to materialize this dissonance that moral injury shows, I construct a framework throughout the thesis, shown in Figure 1 as the *Combatant-Institution Proximity*

³ I use the terms ethical and moral interchangeably, following Richard Norman’s example.

Framework. The *Institutional-Legal Domain* referred to here includes all institutions that contribute to the establishment of moral conduct in war in combination with all laws and regulations that govern conduct. A non-exhaustive list includes the following: just war theory, the United Nations, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, regional organizations, Hague and Geneva Conventions, international humanitarian law, International Criminal Court (Rome Statute), International Court of Justice, law of armed conflict, weapon-specific treaties, *U.S. Law of War Manual*, and enforcement tools like the Uniform Code of Military Justice. The *Sociocultural Domain* is any sociocultural context that a combatant is immersed within. These contexts change through the course of a combatant's career through deployments, changes in chain of command or command structure, and changes in combatant assignment, mission, or orders. The military hierarchy is a key component to an individual's sociocultural atmosphere. Last, in order to grasp the magnitude of moral injury, the word *Individual* is used in the framework in favor of the word 'Combatant;' it is crucial that combatants be seen and understood first and foremost as individuals with human experiences.

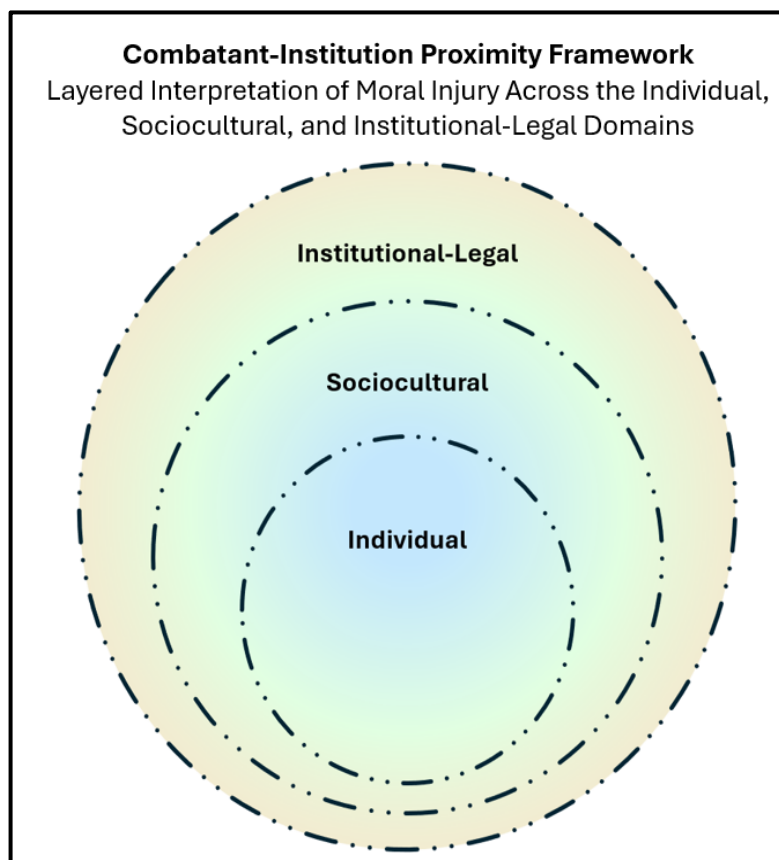


Figure 1

One important note, the *Combatant-Institution Proximity Framework* is not meant to imply that the institutional-legal domain is standalone, nor does it imply a lack of greater sociocultural context external to it. The framework is intended as a tool to illuminate and interpret the complex dynamics underlying combatant moral injury.

The thesis unfolds in three chapters, each building on the last to deepen understanding of moral injury and the *Combatant-Institution Proximity Framework*. Throughout, I use real-world examples to convey lived experiences of combatants and ground the theoretical discussion in concrete cases. Chapter 1 draws on current literature to establish a working definition of moral injury and expresses it as a form of trauma. The chapter discusses causes of moral injury as well as reviews primary symptoms. It then concludes by highlighting the role of moral codes and conscience in shaping identity. Defining moral injury lays the foundation for interpreting the discussion of combatant identity that follows in Chapter 2.

Next, in Chapter 2, I explore the crushing impact moral injury has on a combatant's identity and sense of self, drawing on social, relational, and narrative theories of the self. Thematically through the chapter the individual transforms from civilian to combatant, as I pay special attention to the impact of military hierarchy on identity. The figure of Adolf Eichmann is introduced as a counterexample to discuss the alarming potency of sociocultural influences on identity, as an individual who commit egregious wrongdoing while never showing remorse, guilt, or shame for his actions. Finally, the chapter concludes with a case review centered around a graphic that integrates definitions from Chapter 1 and visually maps examples according to levels of perpetration and corresponding symptom severity.

In Chapter 3, I shift focus to the institutional-legal domain and examine the relationships between combatants and the moral and legal structures governing warfare. The chapter has two main components. First, I examine philosophical traditions and their implications for understanding moral injury. Second, I detail legal mechanisms, specifically from the United States, to reveal the relational distance between the individual combatant and the institutional-legal realm. The abuse at Abu Ghraib prison serves as a case study in the failure to uphold the institutions of just war and highlights the dual responsibility of leadership: to uphold ethical institutions of war and to cultivate unit-level culture that shapes combatant experience. Together these chapters construct the *Combatant-Institution Proximity Framework*, offering a

comprehensive understanding of how moral injury reveals metaphorical distance between the combatant, their personal morals, and the structures that govern moral conduct in war.

Chapter 1: Defining Moral Injury as a Form of Trauma

In this chapter, I pursue the definition of moral injury as a form of trauma that wounds a combatant's identity (Cahill et al., 2023; Litz et al., 2015, pp. 3, 35,37; Nash, 2021; Puder & Harman, 2022; Weiss et al., 2023). Defining moral injury as a form of trauma gives way to further subdividing the categories of moral injury and accommodates various manifestations of identity trauma that injuring one's moral foundations can cause. Recent arguments assert that moral injury concerns human relationships, specifically those that inform a relational self (Cahill et al., 2023; Farnsworth et al., 2017, pp. 5–6; Yandell, 2019, pp. 3–19). This conceptualization of moral injury implies that the moral beliefs which become violated in moral injurious events are not only part of a deeply held system but a part of identity. A thorough examination of combatant identity unfolds in Chapter 2. However, it is important to recognize that identity is both personal and interpersonal; we acquire our selfhood in part through relationships with other people (Atkins, 2008, p. 1,3,8,45; Cahill et al., 2023, p. 226). In this chapter, I first establish a working definition of moral injury. Classifying moral injury as a form of trauma, I include the broadest definition that recent literature offers. Following that, I justify the definition including betrayal and moral dilemma. Next, I expound on the symptoms of moral injury, distinguishing moral injury from posttraumatic stress disorder. Finally, I end the chapter by discussing moral codes and identity formation, outlining how conscience functions as an internal mechanism that mediates between moral codes and emotional experience.

1.1 Defining Moral Injury

Jonathan Shay is credited with bringing the term *moral injury* to the forefront of psychology study and defined the term moral injury to mean “betrayal of what’s right by someone who holds legitimate authority in a high stakes situation” (2014, p. 183). Litz et al. presented an alternate definition in their 2009 paper, calling moral injury “the lasting psychological, biological, spiritual, behavioral, and social impacts of perpetrating, failing to prevent, or bearing witness to acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations” (2009, p. 697). Additionally, they define moral injury as an outcome caused by exposure to potentially morally injurious events (PMIEs) (Litz et al., 2009, pp. 699–700). Together, a combination of the above two

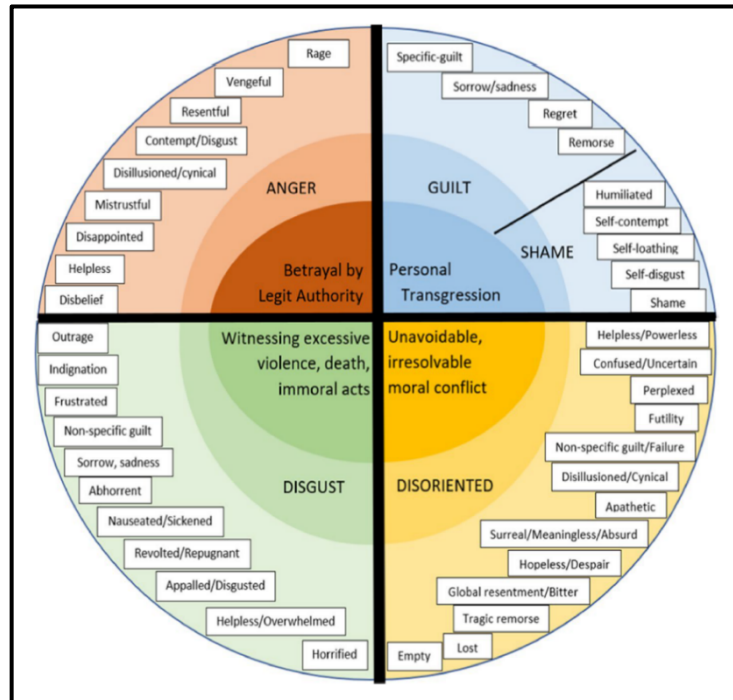


Figure 2: Moral Injury Experience Wheel (Fleming, 2023, p. 205)

NOTE: Use of this figure has been explicitly approved by its author. Further use of it requires permission from the author.

definitions has prevailed over the majority of studies and research. Wesley Fleming distilled and compiled moral injury research in his paper introducing *The Moral Injury Experience Wheel* (Figure 2), where he designed a tool to identify the moral emotions related to moral injury (2023, pp. 198–199). The term ‘moral emotions’ is common to various fields of research on moral injury, so Fleming cites research from primatology, neurology, anthropology, and psychology to define moral emotions as “rapid, reflexive, and intuitive evaluations” and reactions to social situations that guide our sense of right and wrong—often without conscious thought (2023, p. 198). Moral emotions help regulate behavior by triggering feelings like guilt, shame, anger, disgust, remorse, and positive emotions like compassion, gratitude, awe, pride, and empathy (Fleming, 2023, pp. 198, 220). These moral emotions motivate us to act in ways that support social cohesion or even survival (Fleming, 2023, p. 198; Litz et al., 2009, p. 699). Fleming used an iterative process to produce the *Moral Injury Experience Wheel*, compiling empirical data from article review and then using input and feedback from veterans to identify moral emotions associated with morally injurious events. Through this research, he concluded that potentially morally

injurious events consist of four broad categories and established a wide scope of moral emotions corresponding to each of the four categories. Those categories are:

(1) acts of betrayal by others, (2) acts of personal transgression, (3) witnessing acts that violate one's moral code, and (4) worldview discrepant events or 'unavoidable and irresolvable moral conflicts.' (Fleming, 2023, p. 206)

From the above collection of groundbreaking research, moral injury itself can be understood as the suffering that is caused by some event or circumstances, the fracturing of identity in the aftermath of an event. Therefore, I use this inclusive definition of moral injury, mirroring Fleming's four categories:

Moral injury occurs when some traumatic or stressful event causes psychological, behavioral, social, and/or spiritual impacts and distress in the aftermath of exposure to events such as:

- Perpetrating events that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations, or
- Failing to prevent, or witnessing events that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations, or
- Events that prompt instances of disorientation caused by unavoidable and irresolvable moral conflict, or
- Events where individuals experience betrayal from leadership, or those in positions of power or legitimate authority.

1.2 Inclusion of Betrayal and Moral Conflict

When considering moral injury to be a form of traumatic injury to identity, there is good reason to maintain that Shay's 'betrayal of what's right' by leadership is a source of moral injury, and to include 'unavoidable irresolvable conflict' as seen on Fleming's *Moral Injury Experience Wheel*. Fleming noted that the initial concept of moral injury "arose from research seeking to explain the moral dimension of trauma," indicating that moral injury was originally—and continues to be—understood within the context of trauma (2023, p. 199). Despite this shared foundation, the short history of defining moral injury has seen vast differences in opinion about what types of experiences should be included as causes. Joseph Wiinikka-Lydon criticizes the uniformity of definitions in the discourse surrounding moral injury, and per his division, the definition used in this thesis suits clinical discourse (2019). As he points out, the clinical discourse surrounding moral injury

has generally focused on a veteran perspective (Wiinikka-Lydon, 2019, pp. 177–178). Additionally, the clinical discourse is most relative to premise that moral injury sufferers are casualties of war. Within the three discourses that Wiinikka-Lydon compares, there is a promising and significant overlap in ideas behind moral injury; his call for a unified and interdisciplinary approach to moral injury would strengthen the understanding of moral injury in this framework.

Combatants are positioned within a hierarchical power dynamic. Consequently, the actions and decisions of their superior commanders and leaders will impact them. Even if combatants take measures against a superior officer for immoral actions, the process is lengthy and does not guarantee an outcome that would re-instill faith in leadership or trust in ‘the system.’ In many cases, combatants may not have the time or ability to stand up to a superior. It is often assumed that a superior has different or better information within the dynamic. For example, if a commander gives orders to kill a person that a combatant believes is an innocent bystander, there could be information missing from the combatant’s view. Consider the matter of relationships: leader-follower or superior-subordinate relationships will always pose some tension or play some part in a combatant’s perception of a high-stress situation or potentially morally injurious event. Even if a combatant feels guilt or shame about their own role in an event, the relationship of the combatant to their superior plays a part in that combatant’s moral estimation of what is right and wrong. Witnessing a superior officer commit what feels like moral betrayal fits within the definition offered by Litz et al., since betrayal constitutes an intimate violation of the combatant’s personal beliefs and morals. Military honor codes and integrity guidelines are relevant here—not only are they formally codified in doctrine, but they often align with combatant’s personal values. When combatants witness leaders forsake and betray these codes, this experience could cause moral injury. Military ethics codes vary across the globe, but typically emphasize aspects of personal accountability, respect, integrity, duty, and service before self (“Exploring Honor Codes in Different Countries,” 2024). Due to the leader-follower structure and the ingrained nature of military honor codes, it is most appropriate to clearly spell out that betrayal can give rise to moral injury. Acknowledging betrayal in the definition of moral injury gives merit and recognition to the role relationships play in a superior-subordinate hierarchy.

Practically speaking, many organizations use a combination of Shay and Litz et al.'s conceptualizations of moral injury. For example, the definition from the Australian Defense Force's glossary includes both betrayal and perpetration as potential causes of moral injury, and they categorize moral injury as a trauma-related syndrome (Bellman, 2024). The United States Department of Veteran Affairs tends to lean more heavily on perpetration, but it is worth mentioning that they have published articles including betrayal as recently as August 2024 and then neglected to include it in an article from January 2025, a point that underscores the need for a more concrete and universal definition of moral injury (Maguen & Litz, 2012; *Moral Injury and PTSD*, 2025; S. B. Norman & Maguen, 2024a, 2024b). One question is whether moral injury occurs to the perpetrator of an action or to the subject of an action. The *Moral Injury Experience Wheel* provides an exceptional explanation of how moral emotions render themselves as injurious regardless of status as perpetrator or victim of a morally injurious event, in both cases combatants are subjects of suffering.

The following example, taken from Fleming's research, attests to the breathtaking magnitude of betrayal that combatants suffer, as well as showcasing irresolvable and unavoidable moral conflict:

Rob was a combatant who served in the United States Marine Corps and was deployed to Afghanistan. He shared his moral injury experience while in a session of group therapy that had corresponding sessions using the *Moral Injury Experience Wheel* to analyze his feelings. Rob's battalion assumed responsibility for the security of an Afghan village after relieving British forces but soon suffered heavy losses from Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs). His unit earned the trust of the villagers and built a strong, cooperative relationship over the course of a year. After this period of relative peace, the battalion handed control of the village over to the Afghan army. Almost immediately, the Afghan army bombed the village into rubble (Fleming, 2023, pp. 214–218). Below are Rob's words, shared in a group session as a part of Fleming's research:

"I wanted answers about what happened to that village—I felt guilty that we let them down but also angry that we turned it over the nationals and they destroyed it. So betrayed and angry... but more than that. The more I think about my story the more I realize there are no answers. So, I think I'm disoriented cause I feel disillusioned. It all seems futile. I can try and blame but it does no good. I joined to defend our country and do what was right. But the handwriting was on the wall about how the

war would end long before I arrived. My issue is with human beings. Will we always be at war?" (Fleming, 2023, p. 216)

This example shows how relationships matter in moral injury, and not only relationships with other people, but institutions as well. Rob experienced severe betrayal, and it is clear that it was not perpetrated by a single other person, but his experience transpired due to a high-level institutional decision, and his moral injury involved the realization of total lack of control within combat. The leader-follower dynamic contributed as Rob's duty shifted from protecting and building a relationship with the villagers—to a duty to simply follow orders when his unit relinquished control and placed the village into the hands of the Afghan army. Finally, Rob's moral obligation to obey orders comes into direct conflict with his moral conviction to protect the innocent villagers.

One can experience violations of deeply held beliefs by one's own hand, a peer's, an authority figure, by a subordinate's hand, or any entity that a combatant has a relationship with. Moral injury is often examined in the context of interpersonal engagement, but Rob's story shows that the relationships combatants have with institutions engender devastating betrayal and moral conflict. Because I engage moral injury as a form of trauma that wounds one's identity, there is no reason to limit it solely to harm caused by perpetration. It is important to validate betrayal and irresolvable moral conflict as potential sources of trauma to identity and to explore the moral emotions and pain that they bear.

1.3 Moral Injury as a Form of Trauma

Recall that Litz et al. describes the events that combatants are exposed to which may cause moral injury as *potentially morally injurious events* or experiences (PMIEs). An event or experience must "severely and abruptly contradict an individual's personal or shared expectation about the rules or code of conduct" (Litz et al., 2009, p. 700). Combatants are trained for violent situations; to an extent, they can expect traumatic experiences and their training likely aids in emotionally and psychologically processing these events (Drescher et al., 2011, p. 1). As the term implies, exposure to potentially morally injurious events does not *guarantee* that a combatant will suffer from moral injury; rather, labeling events as potentially morally injurious is an attempt to understand what kinds of events might cause moral injury (Litz et al., 2009, pp. 696, 700).

Most, if not all, research on moral injury mentions trauma in some context. One way trauma has been linked to moral injury is by citing moral injury as a result of traumatic circumstances, assessing traumatic events or stressors as causal to moral violations, or calling moral injury a trauma-related injury (Bellman, 2024; VA.Gov | *Veterans Affairs*, n.d.). Some analyses concern the comorbidity of moral injury with trauma-related disorders such as PTSD (Jones, 2020). The initial Litz et al. paper delineated the shared symptoms and social cognitive theories of PTSD, and related the lack of knowledge about moral injury to insufficient research on psychological trauma in veterans (Litz et al., 2009, p. 696). A paper published in 2018 analyzed military trauma to identify its moral aspects (Molendijk et al., 2018). Throughout all of these, it is clear that moral injury is a form of trauma.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) presents the following definition of trauma:

Individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being. (SAMHSA's Trauma and Justice Strategic Initiative, 2014, p. 7)

This definition of trauma aligns with moral injury, which occurs as the result of an event(s) or experience(s) that causes emotional harm and psychological, behavioral, social, and spiritual distress. I propose the term *identity trauma* to refine the form of trauma that moral injury represents. This delineation clarifies the specific kinds of events and moral emotions that constitute moral injury as a distinct form of trauma.

The American Psychological Association (APA) provides a similar definition of trauma, citing that traumatic events can be caused by human behavior and “often challenge an individual's worldview as just, safe, and predictable” (*Trauma*, 2018). This aspect of trauma is important because often, symptoms of moral injury include challenges to an individual's worldviews such as loss of meaning in the world, belief that the world is immoral, and loss of faith. Both of these definitions reinforce moral injury as a form of trauma.

1.4 Moral Injury Symptoms

The impact of moral injury varies widely, but symptoms include overwhelming guilt, remorse, shame, disgust, inability to forgive oneself, loss of faith or spiritual

beliefs, meaninglessness, and loss of trust. Other symptoms can include depression, anxiety, anger, self-harm, and social dysfunction and isolation (Litz et al., 2009; Fleming, 2023; Koenig & Al Zaben, 2021). These are not ordinary emotions of guilt and shame but crippling emotions. These emotions impair those suffering from moral injury and individuals may feel like they have lost part of themselves or their identity (Puder & Harman, 2022).

It is important to distinguish moral injury from mental illness. The harm done following some event is an injury: the word *injury* in moral injury is indicative of the damage and loss sustained by a person. *Injury* moves the concept of moral injury away from being a mental illness. The concept of moral injury should be kept completely separate from the idea of mental illness because the idea of mental illness is often accompanied by connotations of defect or chemical imbalance that might be predetermined or confused with deficiency or weakness. Though PTSD is quite different symptomatically and mechanistically, there is a recent and relevant movement to change PTSD from being a “disorder” toward a conceptualization as an injury, similar to moral injury.

Mentioned earlier, PTSD and moral injury are often comorbid, complicating recognition and delineation of moral injury from PTSD, but several studies now show they are symptomatically and mechanistically different. Litz et al. paper in 2009 was motivated by the fact that PTSD diagnostic criteria do not address the impact of events that cause psychological fracturing seen in cases of moral injury. “Events that provoke shame and guilt may not be assessed or targeted sufficiently,” due to practitioners focusing instead on the impact of life-threatening trauma over trauma with moral and ethical implications (Litz et al., 2009, p. 696). The American Psychiatric Association Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) diagnostic criteria for PTSD lists directly experiencing traumatic events, or witnessing them occurring (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, pp. 217–272). This partially overlaps with moral injury but fails to account for betrayal and irresolvable moral conflict. Additionally, though there are a few symptomatic overlaps per the DSM-5, such as negative emotions about oneself or the world (as in criterion D), negative emotions symptomatic of PTSD are centered around fear and horror (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 272). When DSM-5 addresses these moral emotions, they are addressed as a consequence of the traumatic experience rather than the source of the suffering (Molendijk et al., 2018,

p. 38). The majority of diagnostic criteria for PTSD is fear based, and key symptoms of PTSD are: hypervigilance, startle response, intrusive thoughts or flashbacks, sleep disturbances, irritability, or anger outbursts. While these are not impossible to experience in moral injury, the focus of the symptom in PTSD is the threat of danger, while the focus of moral injury symptoms is some moral distress, wrong, or violation of belief (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, pp. 271–273). A neurobiology study in 2019 used meta data analysis of fMRIs to conclude that while often comorbid, the neurobiology mechanisms differ between fear-based PTSD and moral emotions-based moral injury (Barnes et al., 2019).

There may be some relationship between moral injury and other mental health diagnoses such as PTSD but there is not yet sufficient research in understanding this relationship (Farnsworth et al., 2017, p. 3). Recognizing moral injury as a form of trauma with its own distinct features is vital. Moral injury is a wound which requires diagnosis, care, and lifelong healing.

1.5 Moral Codes and Conscience

The way an individual conducts their life in the world is governed by their set of morals, values, principles, and beliefs. Terms such as moral code, moral fiber, moral foundation, or moral framework suggest that this set of beliefs makes up a structure that individuals can rely upon or that morals are something individuals build their worldview or identity around. This belief system guides their choices and judgments about what the best or most appropriate course of action might be and shapes a person's ability to form concepts of right and wrong in the society within which they live. Related to this framework or guiding system is one's *conscience*. One's conscience is their internal sense of right and wrong, a faculty which judges both retrospectively and prospectively the moral quality of one's actions or motives; it also plays a role in setting expectations about behavior for oneself and others (*Conscience, n. Meanings, Etymology and More | Oxford English Dictionary*, n.d.; Litz et al., 2009, p. 701; Sulmasy, 2008, pp. 136–139). Conscience, as a faculty, can be considered the mechanism by which moral emotions are evoked. Personal judgements are applied to a situation retrospectively as the conscience deliberates about actions taken (or inaction) during an event, or circumstance. Meanwhile, emotions such as guilt and shame are associated with those judgements. Alternatively, in prospective situations, one's conscience anticipates and prompts

certain actions in the face of moral decision making. When the prospective conscience and its accompanying emotions are alerted, this does not guarantee compliance with one's own conscience. Moral emotions persist, particularly in the case of irresolvable moral conflict—where no action can satisfy internal peace with one's moral code. Moral emotions are typically considered signs of a healthy functioning conscience (Fleming, 2023, p. 219; Litz et al., 2009, p. 701; Sulmasy, 2008, p. 136).

The conscience is a broader and more complex faculty than moral emotions alone, and this thesis does not attempt to establish or rely on a comprehensive theory of conscience. My aim is to highlight how moral emotions such as guilt, shame, or remorse interact with one's moral code, and how these emotions are shaped through interpersonal relationships. The conscience is relevant here as a mechanism through which moral judgements and emotions are integrated and experienced.

The capacity to make judgments about conduct within society makes morals both internal and interpersonal simultaneously. As we move through the world, we also apply these morals to those surrounding us; our morals inform relationships by determining value alignment between us and others, guiding behavior, and setting expectations about how we should act toward others and how others should act toward us. One's moral code is integrated into their conscience and thus shapes emotions like shame, guilt, pride, envy, and embarrassment. Moral emotions of self-consciousness arise from evaluating oneself in relation to social norms that we are immersed in (Lewis, n.d., pp. 4–5). Moral emotions within relationships shape complex facets of identity, such as trust, respect, and empathy. In total, moral codes influence moral emotions, relationships, habits, actions, and judgments.

In the Litz et al. 2009 paper, morality is a belief system or code that individuals live by. They emphasize moral injury as a violation of that code, but it is important to acknowledge that conflicts *within* the belief system can also cause moral dilemmas (Litz et al., 2009, pp. 698–699; Molendijk et al., 2018). Individuals must contextualize their moral code within events and experiences as they happen, which leads to a judgment of morality—what is right. Moral codes, despite their structure, may still contain more than one conflicting belief for an individual, which can lead to moral stress and moral dilemmas (Molendijk et al., 2018).

A combatant is immersed in an environment that challenges common sociocultural beliefs such as “killing is wrong.” They are confronted by moral dilemmas and stressors while in combat. Morality is thus not a perfectly concrete set of principles but rather circumstantially dependent. When a combatant faces killing someone, the situation and laws governing warfare dictate if killing is right or wrong. Moreover, changes in rules of engagement over the course of a conflict or throughout a combatant’s career call into question the consistency and reliability of the moral principles communicated by military institutions. Returning to civilian life, these same combatants must adhere to a moral code that differs severely from that of combat. This flexibility is also epistemological: knowledge about a situation changes the morality of that action, even after an event has occurred. Combatants who are faced with killing other people are always at risk of gaining knowledge that changes the morality of their actions retrospectively. In these moments, *conscience* is the faculty that retrospectively evaluates one’s actions through the lens of their moral code. For example, a combatant kills someone whom they perceive to be a threat to her unit’s safety—a faraway figure wearing a bulky vest that might be an IED. After killing the person, it turns out that this ‘enemy’ was actually an unarmed tall child in a winter vest with no IED and was not a threat. The combatant then feels guilt and shame for the decision that led her to kill an innocent child, despite that knowledge not being available prior to her actions.

1.6 Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter, I have established a definition of moral injury as a form of trauma that profoundly impacts a combatant’s identity when one’s core moral beliefs are violated. This perspective allows for an inclusive definition with options to further categorize moral injury in the future. I also explored perspectives that consider moral beliefs as a component of identity. Moral injury highlights the importance of interpersonal relationships and social norms in the formation of morals. Chapter 2 will delve deeper into the concept of the combatant as an individual and the formation of identity under the violent and unique components of war.

Chapter 2: Combatant Identity – Is what I do who I am?

The crushing impact that moral injury has on a combatant's identity and sense of self demonstrates metaphorical distance between an individual and the laws and institutions that impose morality on conduct within war. This chapter situates the individual combatant at the center of the *Combatant-Institution Proximity Framework* via theories that interpret social, relational, and narrative components of identity. I argue that the individual is engulfed in the sociocultural layer through relationships and social units that form their self and identity. This formulation goes beyond complementing the *Combatant-Institution Proximity Framework* and progresses by explaining the impact to identity that moral injury has—further supporting moral injury as a form of trauma to identity. Social Identity Theory elucidates the moment “where *I* becomes *we*”—a pivotal shift in a combatant's identity as their sense of self grows to include their military unit (Brewer, 1991, p. 476). Theories of relational and narrative self further aid in understanding moral injury by emphasizing how identity is shaped through relationships. By applying these theories to combatants suffering from moral injury, I aim to describe how traumatic fracturing of identity reveals itself through social and relational dimensions.

This chapter journeys through pertinent aspects of combatant identity, giving special consideration to the influences that military service and hierarchy have in connection to each of two prominent identity theories. Along the way, I discuss the relative implications of moral injury, and revisit Lieutenant Johnson, the helicopter pilot, as an example. The conversation about identity culminates by examining the difficulty combatants face in distinguishing their actions from their identity. I then introduce a grave counterexample in the figure of Adolf Eichmann to illustrate the sociocultural influences on identity and briefly reflect on his conscience as a faculty shaped by a distorted moral system. Despite perpetrating grievous crimes against humanity, he exhibited no signs of moral injury. Finally, to integrate the definitions from Chapter 1 with the example cases, I present a graphic depicting the relationship between the scale of perpetration and the intensity of symptomatic impact. This visual helps distinguish between different types of moral injury such as perpetration, witnessing, and betrayal—showing how each may correlate with the spectrum of moral injury symptoms. In doing so, it provides a clearer understanding of how

different experiences of moral injury lead to varying degrees of disruption and fracturing of a combatant's identity. This chapter weaves together visual and thematic elements to convey the dissonance brought on by moral injury, marked by a retreat into isolation and the disruption of social, relational, and narrative identity.

2.1 From Civilian to Combatant

Besides asking oneself the classic philosophical question— “Who am I?” or “What makes me who I am?”—combatants invariably include introspective questions about their profession, such as “What am I fighting for?” and “Why do I serve?” Discussed later, social, relational, and narrative dimensions of identity are influenced by surroundings, and in the case of combatants, this includes a structure of hierarchy. The military rank system institutes a regimented hierarchal relationship between members by defining combatants' place among a command and leadership framework. The system enforces crystal clear power and authority boundaries organizationally, as well, it designates their level of responsibility and commensurate pay. Every interaction and relationship within the military hierarchy is designated as vertical—superior-subordinate, or horizontal—peer-to-peer. Additionally, the hierarchy instills strict social structures by instituting regulations prohibiting fraternization between enlisted and officer ranks (U.S. Department of Defense, 2024, p. 461). Even language used in the vertical relationships is regulated by employing requirements such as using “ma'am” or “sir” when addressing a superior, and allowing only seven basic responses: “yes sir/ma'am,” “no sir/ma'am,” “no excuse, sir/ma'am,” “sir/ma'am, may I make a statement,” “sir/ma'am, may I ask a question,” “sir/ma'am, I do not understand,” and “sir/ma'am, I do not know.” Besides these, no other responses are acceptable in a training environment unless explicitly instructed otherwise. Subordinates are required to render a salute to superiors, who can, at any time, order them to stand at attention or parade rest. This practice serves as a means of control, visibly reinforcing the power dynamic, and to some extent, as a form of subordination, particularly when used as a corrective measure. Standards for physical posture, appearance, behavior, uniform insignia, and language are all regulated aspects of the superior-subordinate relationship. These rules become second nature to military members and are codified in decorum. This indicates that a combatant's position within the hierarchy is more complex than that of a simple boss-worker vertical relationship, and more ingrained by its features.

Moreover, the military is comprised of a unit structure that dictates an organizational hierarchy, complementing the rank structure. Larger units are composed of smaller units, and the organizational chain of command dictates which units are subordinate, and which are lateral. The hierarchy is reinforced by ingrained core values, mottos, official vision, mission, and abiding creeds that span entire service branches. Members are encouraged to develop a social military identity early in training as a recruit—a practice which facilitates their metamorphosis from civilian into combatant (Thompson et al., 2017, pp. 30–31). Combatants are subject to the systematic and enduring indoctrination into the embrace of military hierarchy (Hart & Lancaster, 2019, p. 47; Thompson et al., 2017, pp. 30–31). Both the organizational framework and the interpersonal dynamics of the chain of command reinforce elements of a combatant’s identity and contribute to transformation from civilian into combatant.

2.2 Social Identity and Self

The concept of the self is highly debated in philosophy and psychology. Here the self is the entity that thinks, perceives, and acts; the self is the subject of experience, identity, and consciousness. Identity is defined as a construct: our representation of ourselves to the world, as well as how we make sense of who we are (Andersen & Chen, 2002, p. 636; Brewer, 1991, pp. 475–476; Thompson et al., 2017, p. 18). As this thesis does not provide analysis of the difference between self and identity, I use language mirroring the sources of each theory. Social Identity Theory is relevant to how a combatant experiences war and adopts a social identity as a part of a military unit. One such theory is delivered by Marilynn Brewer, who expands on Social Identity Theory originally forged by Henri Tajfel and John Turner. Brewer situates individual identity at the core of concentric circles which symbolize “definitions of the self at different levels of inclusiveness,” resembling a hierarchy of social identities (1991, p. 476). In her model, shown in Figure 3, one’s self grows and shrinks to include situational and contextual levels of social identity. Rather than considering one’s relationships to social groups as *attributes* to one’s self, she stresses that one’s social identities are *extensions* of one’s self (Brewer, 1991). Actions which defy logic or rationality, such as self-sacrifice, can be explained by social identities that connect an individual to an in-group as an extension of their self.

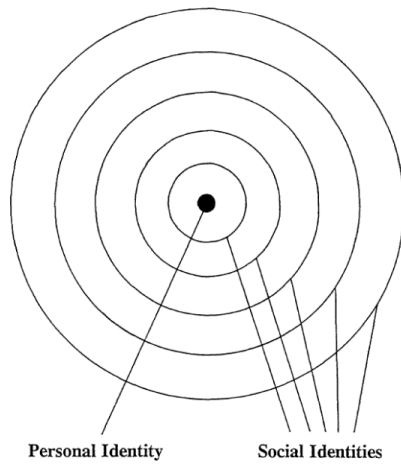


Figure 3: Personal and Social Identities

Under this theory, for example, Lieutenant Johnson might adopt a social identity as a member of the 722nd Attack Helicopter Flying Company (one unit bigger than a platoon);⁴ call this the second concentric circle of Figure 3. Through this social identity his concept of self includes the mission he executes within the company along with its other members. The basis of comparison for this social identity would be other company units (peer units) within the military organizational hierarchy like the Maintenance Company, or the Flying

Training Company. At some point, Lieutenant Johnson might expand his social identity to encompass the entire military branch, which would then be represented by an outer ring of Figure 3. A combatant's unit within the military hierarchy provides them with a distinct social identity. Figure 3 can be envisioned superimposed on Figure 1, the *Combatant-Institution Proximity Framework* (p. 4), with concentric circles expanding into the *Sociocultural Domain*.

Combatants risk their personal safety and comfort for the benefit of others. Instinctively, they put their life in harm's way to protect others. Mantras like '*defend and protect*' or '*that others may live*' signal a combatant's extension of their social identities to include their military units, friends, the military hierarchy, and the civilians they protect, making all of these others an integral part of their identity. Military members have committed themselves to protect those outside of their immediate in-groups, devoting themselves to a social identity that places them within a large-order-magnitude in-group like national identity, or even humanity.

Brewer's Social Identity Theory does not address moral injury directly, but it can be used to interpret how symptoms like guilt or shame may arise when social identities recede, shifting the burden of moral emotions onto solely the individual. A moral injury sufferer neglects the identity and sense of self that was acting in the face of a potentially morally injurious event in favor of an overly individualized self-conceptualization. An unhealthy manifestation of guilt ignores the multitude of social identities involved in high stress or violent circumstances that make up potentially

⁴ The company number and all company titles are placeholders, not historical examples.

morally injurious situations. Feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, despair, and meaninglessness are symptoms of moral injury that upend a sufferer's identity and sense of self in the world. Another interpretation of Brewer's theory is that these feelings might be self-compounding, both arising upon identity withdraw and *causing* withdraw from social identities toward the center of Figure 3. Delayed onset of moral injury symptoms might be the result of being removed from context of that experience, for example, no longer being within the unit or upon transitioning to civilian life. When combatants change military units, return from a deployment, move to a different base or operating location, this changes their most immediate social identities by changing the military unit or the mission they identify with, leaving them more vulnerable and more likely to withdraw from previous social identities. Moral injury symptoms demonstrate social identity retraction, creating metaphorical distance from others by severing connections between a combatant and those with whom she shares a social identity. Extrapolating from Brewer's Social Identity Theory, this retraction reflects a collapse of group-based identity, leaving the individual increasingly isolated from their social units. Along with that, moral injury symptoms denote cognitive distance from others, the world, and the meaning of their military service.

2.3 Relational and Narrative Self

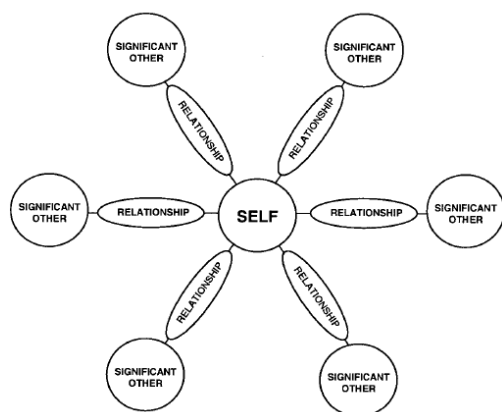


Figure 4: Linkages Between the Self and Significant-Other Representations in Memory.

The concept of a relationally formed self emphasizes the impact of intimate interactions on one's sense of self, and its similarities to the above concept of social identity give way to meaningful overlap and integration. While both approaches aim to crystallize the interpersonal constitution of the self, this concept of the relational self focuses on specific relationships that are deeply

influential due to emotional investments. In addition to shaping how we mentally process relationships, the theory also suggests that our social relationships fundamentally contribute to the formation of identity (Andersen & Chen, 2002, p. 619). At the same time, the personal narrative that one relies on to define oneself is

interwoven into these relationships, taking account of each impactful relationship and mapping them onto one's own storyline. From this perspective, the self emerges through relational bonds and a narrative that is meaning-making (Atkins, 2008, pp. 1–2; Cahill et al., 2023, pp. 225–226).

I submit that the relational and narrative self is connected to the social identities demonstrated in Brewer's model, even integral to those identities. Susan M. Andersen and Serena Chen presented Figure 4 to demonstrate the linkage of self to *significant others*, meaning deeply influential and/or emotionally invested individuals (Andersen & Chen, 2002, p. 619,621). Relationships that influence the self can be imagined as parts of those broader social identities. Figure 5 shows a modified version of the relational self from Figure 4, superimposed over concentric circles representing social identity rings from Brewer's model. Not all relationships have equal bearing on oneself; varying leg lengths of each relationship denote varying emotional and social distances.

Relationships change through an individual's life, as do their influences, which is comparable to the changes of expansion and contraction of identity to encompass one or another level of social identity. Both models apply to the same individual: One's social identity grows and shrinks to incorporate these selves in moments when "*I becomes we*," as Brewer says, implying that one has

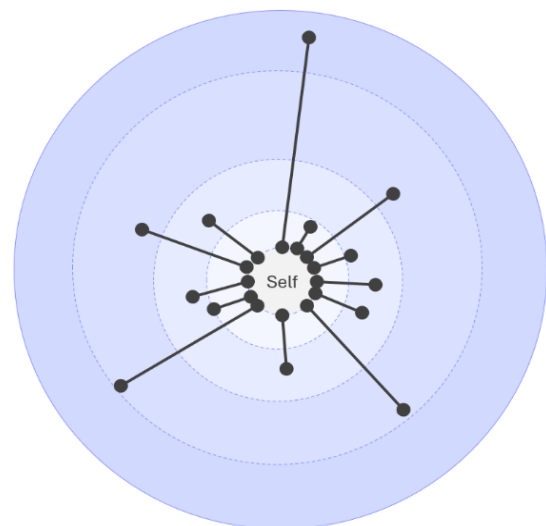


Figure 5: Social & Relational Identity Visualization

abandoned individuality in lieu of group identity. Simultaneously, *relationships* have significant impact on one's sense of self (Brewer, 1991, p. 476).

One's narrative helps generate meaning and position the individual within their own moral horizon of right and wrong. This narrative weaves personal experiences into a coherent moral framework while integrating one's concept of self into that story (Andersen & Chen, 2002, p. 625; Atkins, 2008, p. 2,9,80; Cahill et al., 2023, pp. 225, 226). An individual's narrative is intimately related to relationships. Narrative depicts one's self in terms of relationships with others within that story—even if other individuals are not at the forefront. Through narrative, individuals make sense of their relationships with others and construct a personal story that reflects

an ongoing relationship with themselves. The relational self and narrative self are both necessary to understand a moral horizon by which one evaluates their moral beliefs and identity (Atkins, 2008, Chapter 5; Cahill et al., 2023).

The theory of a relational and narrative self reveals another perspective of how combatants experience moral injury. It helps explain how hierarchical military relationships impact self and identity while supporting the idea that moral injury profoundly affects relationships, including one's relationship with oneself and one's narrative identity (Yandell, 2019). Military hierarchy dictates some of a combatant's influential or important relationships through a command structure. A combatant may not have an emotionally close relationship with their superior or chain of command, and immediate horizontal relationships are not necessarily highly significant either. In fact, when a combatant decides that those within her military hierarchy are not role models, it remains an influential decision within the broader context of identity formation in a narrative framework. If she evaluates her commander to be an unworthy or untrustworthy person, this relationship does not merit moral approval for her decision making in order for her to remain moral in her own self narrative.

The narrative self plays a crucial role in a combatant's comprehension of their own suffering of moral injury. In their article, "Ruptured Selves," Cahill, Moyse & Dugdale elaborate on the relational and narrative self and conclude that "moral injury ruptures one's sense of self" (Cahill et al., 2023, p. 1). They develop the narrative self in parallel to sustaining that we are "relationally constituted beings, [with] identities that are continually shaped through engagement with others" (Cahill et al., 2023, p. 2). This dual development orients individuals to a moral life: while narrative provides a framework for understanding one's place within a moral world, the relational self informs one's moral responsibilities toward others. Through the interplay of relational and narrative self, combatants evaluate their actions and determine right and wrong based on personal narrative and social context (Cahill et al., 2023, p. 1).

Moral injury undermines personal narratives and disrupts the self that has been formed around these relationships and narratives. Furthermore, it causes disorientation and existential crisis by violating one's own beliefs so deeply that meaning-making fundamental to self and identity halts. In the case of moral injury, a combatant's moral values remain, while their trust and understanding of their own identity with respect to these values is shattered:

A soldier's belief remains that killing an innocent person is wrong, but the soldier's sense of identity has broken down. He no longer understands himself to be one who would not take innocent life, nor is he able to continue trusting the expressed commitment of authorities to protect innocent life. (Cahill et al., 2023, p. 227)

For a combatant who has experienced a morally injurious event, deeply held moral beliefs may still persist, but the narrative that once shaped their identity is no longer functional or meaningful.

Consider our helicopter pilot, Lieutenant Johnson, who was ordered to lead a platoon in killing a village full of people whom he perceived as innocent. His personal narrative might have framed his identity as a protector and defender of people—which would have made such an act unthinkable. Yet, in the chaos of war, under orders from leadership, amid threats, uncertainty, and a lack of understanding about the order's rationale, he carried out the orders in that village. Lieutenant Johnson's relationships within the military hierarchy that once were a foundation of trust and morality crumbled with this one event. His identity retreats back from trusting the relationships with commanders, peers, and his self; it retreats back from his social identity as a member of the helicopter unit. Only a broken and collapsed individual identity remains—his narrative has been disrupted, and his self that included relationships, expanding into social unity now only sees personal responsibility, guilt, and shame.

2.4 Is what I do who I am?

According to Dave Blair, a healthy identity for combatants to adopt is that of a *protector*, but under the violence of war, another possibility is that combatants adopt an identity as that of strictly a *killer*. This is indicative of moral injury and instability within their narrative, signifying that this combatant has become untethered from meaningful relationships (Blair, 2023, p. 38). The *killer* identity is a subversion of meaning-making. In the absence of a meaningful narrative such as that of a protector, meaning-making in that combatant's identity turns to exclusively their skillset, another manifestation of retracting from social and relational identity. *What they do becomes who they are*. Narrative is crucial to meaning-making, and in the case of the military profession, the combatants' skill set is seemingly in contention with their purpose—a narrative identity as a protector of people is at odds with their skills as killers and their tools—weapons of violence (Blair, 2023, p. 35).

An important aspect of self-development is distinguishing the difference between one's actions and one's identity. In other words, distinguishing between "who I am" and "what I do." Therapists and chaplains who aid combatants to heal from moral injury contend that this is a significant hurdle to healing, offering reminders that "it's ok to just 'be.' After all, we are 'human being,' not 'human-doing'" (Rev. C. Emerson, personal communication, March 10, 2025). People often associate identity with their work, which is understandable given that many of our social connections and relationships stem from the workplace (Blair, 2023, pp. 35–38; Gini, 1998, p. 707).

For combatants, the bonds formed within their units and across the military hierarchy deepen this connection. It is not surprising, then, that those experiencing moral injury struggle to separate their actions in war from their sense of self.

2.5 TYFYS

"Thank you for your service," (TYFYS) words that many veterans hear from people wishing to express their gratitude to that veteran for all they did or do to serve and protect their nation. The familiar phrase might be heard from total strangers, or from their own friends and family, and veterans also hear it from other veterans. There can be true awkwardness of this exchange, despite being something they commonly hear. Many veterans have preprepared, 'canned' responses that diffuse their internal discomfort, like "My pleasure" or "Thank you for your support," even using comedy to mask feelings with something like, "Thank you for paying taxes." The exchange invokes an instantaneous flash of self-reflection, "What have I done to deserve thanks," "Am I worth this thanks?" Worse, in the context of moral injury, a combatant might reckon with thoughts such as "If they knew the truth they would not thank me." Despite being such a simple exchange, it demonstrates the disruption of moral injury, and how internally directed thoughts and moral emotions about one's character, guilt, shame, and self-worth emerge as harmful. Reception and reaction to TYFYS showcases a combatant's perception of themselves and at the same time their relationship to others, civilians, family members, or peer combatants. Veterans suffering from moral injury may not want to hear TYFYS or deal with the emotions that gestures of thanks bring. The thanker might be naïve to the fact that expressing their gratitude potentially brings negative emotions for the veteran. TYFYS exchanges offer a window to the experience of the individual combatant and

substantiate the theory that moral injury affects a combatant's identity and concept of self.

2.6 Adolf Eichmann

Adolf Eichmann serves as an example of someone who commit atrocities against humanity without any true signs of moral injury. He was a mid-level Schutzstaffel (S.S.) officer in the Nazi Party who was responsible for the logistical coordination of moving millions of Jews to Nazi concentration camps, ghettos, and extermination camps (*Adolf Eichmann (1906 -1962)*, n.d.; Aschheim, 2014; Cesarani, 2011). Eichmann's rank in the S.S. hierarchy equated to Lieutenant Colonel, which did not place him among the highest-ranking leadership of the S.S. He did, however, hold considerable operational power in his role, and is even credited with orchestrating the Final Solution. He showed no signs of regret or remorse, no signs of feeling guilty, nor shame about his role throughout his trial and execution (*Adolf Eichmann (1906 -1962)*, n.d.; Arendt, 2000, pp. 355–356, 364–365). On the contrary, he was quite proud of his accomplishments, bragging about it various times (Arendt, 2000, p. 322). For his trial, several psychologists determined that he was mentally was “normal,” or even desirable in constitution (Arendt, 2006, pp. 25–26). Though his role was bureaucratic in nature, he was not far from the violence, making regular visits to the concentration camps (Cesarani, 2004, pp. 117, 136). There is no question that Eichmann understood the magnitude of his actions, the meaning of murder, and the human cost that he played a central role in exacting.

Hannah Arendt reported on Eichmann's trial held in Jerusalem, where she famously established the concept of the “banality of evil.” In her book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, she contested that Eichmann was a thoughtless bureaucrat, obeying orders and commissioning the worst of crimes as nearly a pawn within the hierarchy. Eichmann lamented that his position in the S.S. was not as high as he deserved, and for that he held regrets (2000, p. 324). Arendt called Eichmann a joiner, indicating that the organizations he joined defined him (Arendt, 2000, p. 323). This image of Eichmann was something of an empty vessel who was eager to take up the identity required of him in order to succeed. Eichmann echoed back lifeless one-liners, slogans and cliches at his trial, incessantly repeating canned stock phrases from higher up leadership. Arendt suspected that these words enveloped him in

protections against speaking or communicating the facts of his atrocities, and most importantly, against thinking for himself (2000, p. 324).

Arendt pursued the question of Eichmann's conscience, aiming to discover what led to the collapse of his moral faculties. According to her, instead of being caused by a psychological abnormality, his failed conscience and lack of moral emotions was due to an inability or refusal to think morally in context with others (Arendt, 2000, p. 324). She suggests that this lack of reflective judgement hollowed him out socially, leaving him unable to discern right from wrong (on his own). Yet in other contexts, Arendt notes that Eichmann's bureaucratic ambition that drove positive moral emotions like pride. This implies that his moral framework was not absent, but disastrously disoriented and backward—so focused on personal advancement that it excluded the moral concern for others, even in the face of mass murder. It is possible that his conscience did not fail, *per se*, but rather, the deranged nature of his moral code distorted its judgement, misfiring moral emotions according to a warped sense of right and wrong. In this way, Eichmann's obsessive prioritization of personal advancement, combined with a refusal or inability to think critically, rendered him a willing vessel for Nazi ideology.

Arendt's portrait of Eichmann differed from Bettina Stangneth, who assembled her own depiction primarily through analysis of the Sassen interviews, a series of interviews conducted by Dutch Nazi journalist Wilhelm Sassen (Stangneth, 2014). Stangneth was convinced that Eichmann was a "passionate, ideologically convinced National Socialist" (Aschheim, 2014). She asserts that Eichmann tailored his narrative and comments to his audience. This accounts for his boastfulness in the Sassen interviews as well as his all-convincing performance as a mere bureaucratic cog at the Jerusalem trial. Regardless which depiction is the most true—Stangneth's image of Eichmann as an ideologically driven and self-assured figure, or Arendt's of him as an unthinking bureaucrat—his subordinates enacted his will. Those who carried out his orders may have complied under pressure, through a sense of duty, or by compartmentalizing their actions. The weight of Eichmann's orders as an operational level logistical commander sending millions to their deaths is undeniable. *Eichmann either embodied the banality of evil, or he delivered it.*

Vacant of guilt and remorse in either account, yet deemed to have normal or even desirable psychology, Eichmann is a puzzling case to consider with respect to moral injury. At best, he harbored no hate toward Jews but adopted the ideology of

his sociocultural atmosphere in order to become the successful bureaucrat he long desired. No doubt, he existed in a sociocultural environment that was permissive and encouraging of the ideological malevolence toward Jews. Lacking feelings of guilt, Eichmann was insulated by the Nazi Party so far as to believe that what he was doing was right. Or possibly, he was enabled by a sociocultural atmosphere to implement the logistics for the Final Solution and send millions to their deaths. In Eichmann's case, the sociocultural atmosphere of the Nazi Party overpowered practically all of the established international institutions of ethical warfare at the time.

2.7 Review of Cases

Thus far, the examples of combatant moral injury brought to illustrate the *Combatant-Institution Proximity Framework* have fallen into various broad categories. To exhibit the wide range of ways moral injury can manifest, I introduce Figure 6: *Moral Injury: A Continuum of Perpetration & Symptomatic Impact*. This visually maps a variety of example cases along two axes, clarifying the complexity of different possible combatant experiences and symptoms.

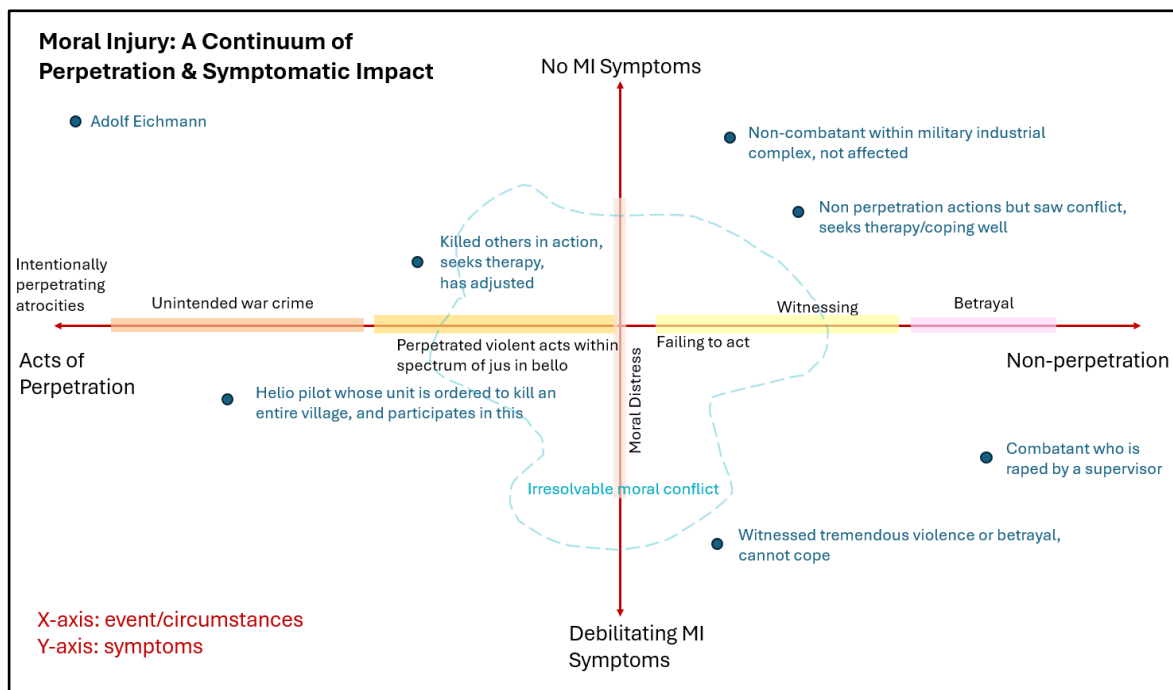


Figure 6

In the figure, **events** are mapped onto the x-axis, ranging from “Acts of Perpetration” to “Non-perpetration,” and **symptoms** of moral injury are mapped onto the y-axis ranging from “Debilitating Moral Injury Symptoms,” to “No Moral Injury Symptoms.”

Included in this figure are example cases, some of which have been discussed, others are for demonstration only. Below are the primary case types inferred from *Moral Injury: A Continuum of Perpetration & Symptomatic Impact*, starting from the top right quadrant moving clockwise:

Case 1: Combatant who has not perpetrated and does not have difficulties coping with any distressing moral experiences and thus have no significantly impactful symptoms.*⁵

Case 2: Combatants who did not perpetrate a personal transgression, but rather was betrayed by someone, failed to prevent, or witnessed something that transgressed personal beliefs, and is then affected by moral injury symptoms.

Example: Rob who was a Marine in Afghanistan (pp. 9-10). Note: His case includes irresolvable moral conflict, but not every occurrence of Case 2 would necessarily include irresolvable moral conflict. Irresolvable moral conflict can arise in a number of different cases and ways, as shown on the figure.

Case 3: Combatant who perpetrated an act (either in compliance with institutional-legal structures or not) and is affected by significant moral injury symptoms.

Example: Lieutenant Johnson, the helicopter pilot.

Case 4: Combatant who perpetrated some act and does not suffer significant moral injury symptoms, because they either

- a. Complied with all institutional-legal structures of moral warfare **and** their morals align well with those institutions, **or** they seek therapy to recover from moral injury.*
- b. Has delayed reaction, possibly from defense mechanisms such as compartmentalization or disassociation.*
- c. **Did not** comply with institutional-legal structure for moral warfare (i.e., violated rules of engagement, committed atrocities) and either:
 - i. Adopted an identity as a killer or has psychopathic tendencies.*

⁵ NOTE: *Cases marked with an asterisk are not precluded from changes in identity caused by moral distress or moral injury, or the above-described formations of identity by social, relational narrative connections. However, I do not discuss these cases in this thesis as I am not discussing recovery methods or special psychiatric scenarios that pertain to them.

- ii. **Or** is engulfed by sociocultural context that finds acceptable or encourages immoral actions.

Figure 6 is a representation of both parts of the definition of moral injury from Chapter 1, including a full spectrum of perpetration, betrayal, witnessing, and irreconcilable moral dilemma, while accommodating a range of symptoms that might be psychological, behavioral, social, and/or spiritual. Furthermore, Figure 6 and corresponding cases 1 through 4 support deeper exploration of how different experiences of moral injury relate to the fracturing of identity. *Moral Injury: A Continuum of Perpetration & Symptomatic Impact* implicitly supports my *Combatant-Institution Proximity Framework* by presenting cases where institutional-legal structures might align or clash with personal moral codes. It also recognizes the combatant as an individual whose suffering is shaped by personal belief and sociocultural context, and whose pain can be intensified or mitigated by the relationships and structures surrounding them.

2.8 Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter, I reviewed social, relational, and narrative constructions of combatant identity and self and showed the impacts of hierarchy and military service on these constructions. Moral injury exhibits wounds to identity through symptoms that retract identity away from meaningful social identities and relationships, and disorient the meaning-making of a combatant's narrative identity. This indicates that individual combatants are engulfed in a sociocultural layer which creates metaphorical distance from the institutional-legal domain governing the moral conduct of war. Adolf Eichmann serves as an example of a perpetrator of great atrocities unimpacted by moral injury—further evidence that the sociocultural layer can insulate individuals from the institutions of just war. Lastly, I reviewed *Moral Injury: Continuum of Perpetration & Symptomatic Impact*, a visual that maps cases of moral injury across two key axes, affirming the definition of moral injury while also portraying its complexity. In the next chapter, I evaluate these institutions and laws, positioning them within the third tier as an objective arm of morals, and highlighting the gap between the individual combatant and the institutional-legal context of moral conduct in war.

Chapter 3: Institutional-Legal Domain of Moral Conduct in War

Individual combatants are integral to the violent totality of war. In parallel to the greater institution of war, those institutions governing the just and ethical conduct within war aim to reduce its horrors (Frowe, 2016, pp. 99–103; Johnson, 2015, pp. 119–121; *The Geneva Conventions of 12 AUGUST 1949*, 1949, pp. 19–21, 31). War is by nature violent and in tension with these moral institutions whose purpose is to reduce brutality. Reductively, they have conflicting values: for example, the principle of military necessity is in tension with the principle of humanity—requiring combatants to enact violence while adhering to rules intended to minimize suffering. The combatant must kill others, regardless. The humanity of the combatant is seemingly in contest between these institutions, as war demands violence, but just war conventions demand that war respect the value of human life. All these various institutions have their own sets of morals that they ‘burden’ the combatant with. The burden arises with the potential for moral dilemma, distress, and injury within the violence of combat by requiring constituents to uphold all values and morals of ethical conduct but also commit violence. This burden intensifies when rules of engagement shift mid-conflict, forcing combatants to adapt their conduct to new ethical regulations amid ongoing violence. And still, somewhere within that, a combatant’s personal beliefs inevitably remain. The institutions this thesis is concerned with are all those converging on just and moral conduct of war, even if these institutions do not have one identical set of values and morals. Moral injury may be reduced by upholding these institutions and by honoring the humanity of all people, including combatants. But the combatant must kill others, regardless. Even when they attempt to curb human suffering, institutions treat combatants as an object of war, exposing institutions as frameworks interacting amongst themselves, abstract to the individual.

This chapter identifies pivotal relationships between the combatants and the institutions of just conduct within war. If the sociocultural layer surrounds an individual combatant, how are these combatants connected to the institutions they serve? In the *Combatant-Institution Proximity Framework*, the sociocultural layer interacts with the institutions as well as the combatants. Here, I examine two major institutions shaping moral conduct within war. The first institution I approach is the philosophical tradition of just war theory. Reflecting on the convergence of moral

philosophy and jurisprudence, I submit arguments supporting the humanity of combatants—differing them from being mere tools of war. Subsequently, I examine both traditional and revisionist approaches to the moral equivalency of combatants and relate these theories to moral injury. Just war theory historically has formed and informed international law, so in further exploring the intersection between the two, I examine the military attorneys that serve as representatives of the law, the United States Judge Advocate General Corps (JAG Corps, or just JAG). These intersections illustrate how combatants are treated as objects of war. Moreover, they demonstrate the figurative movement from subjective, personal, and emotional experience to the objective structure of legal and institutional frameworks.

Throughout this chapter, when I reference institutions, I specifically mean the collection of institutions, laws, and treaties, which make up the institutional-legal domain governing the moral and just conduct of warfare. If I am talking about broader institutions, I will indicate such. Second, a disclaimer: this chapter applies and interprets U.S. law, but it is important to recognize that critical distinctions exist between the U.S. and other nations regarding the interpretation of the law of armed conflict—particularly in the applicability of international human rights law (IHRL) during conflict. The U.S. takes the position that the law of armed conflict (LOAC), also called international humanitarian law (IHL), is the *lex specialis* during armed conflict, and therefore does not generally apply IHRL concurrently. Accordingly, this discussion does not address IHRL.⁶

3.1 Just War Theory

As an ethical framework constructed to best determine the moral permissibility of war and conduct within war, just war theory negotiates the space between what is moral and what is lawful in warfare. This philosophical tradition prioritizes the value of human life, placing ethical limits on warfare, offering *jus ad bellum*—the moral or ethical considerations of going to war, *jus in bello*—the moral conduct of those engaged in war, and *jus post bellum*—the moral and ethical actions required in the aftermath of war (Johnson, 2015, p. 119). The transition of *jus ad*

⁶ For further explanation, see the *DoD Law of War Manual*, § 1.3.2, § 1.6.3, § 1.6.3.1 (*Department of Defense Law of War Manual*, 2023, pp. 19, 21, 23), and *The Operational Law Handbook*, Chapter 6, page 182 (Reitz, 2024), and (*What Is the Difference between IHL and Human Rights Law?*, 2015).

bellum to *jus in bello* reflects a shift with respect to the military chain of command from high level leader whose decisions are governed by *jus ad bellum* to individual combatants who are held accountable under *jus in bello* as they face the realities of combat. Due to the scope of this thesis, I focus on combatant conduct within war, but I also include relevant discussion surrounding the inseparability of *jus in bello* and *jus ad bellum*. Though *jus post bellum* plays a critical role in recognizing and addressing moral injury sufferers as casualties of war, I leave this analysis for another time.

The main historical foundations of just war theory were primarily shaped by theologians and legal scholars (Johnson, 2017). Focusing on their contributions to *jus in bello*, three germane examples are Saint Thomas Aquinas, Hugo Grotius, and lastly Emmerich de Vattel. Aquinas contributed significantly through his work *Summa Theologiae* (Brown et al., 2002, pp. 195–197). Aquinas uses language of moral and theological reasoning, predicating his theories on a universal order that is rationally knowable, and rooted in the divine natural order governed by natural laws. What is more, violating these natural laws results in a moral failure in his framework. Describing rightful intention in *Summa Theologiae* (II-II, q. 40, a. 1), he says belligerents should “intend the advancement of good or the avoidance of evil” (Aquinas, 2012, p. 226). Aquinas grounds his moral theory of just war in the rational nature of human beings, and their individual capacity to reason morally through the exercise of conscience. In *Summa Theologiae* (I-I, q. 79, a. 13), Aquinas defines conscience as an act of relating knowledge to some context (1274a/1920). He describes conscience in a way that echoes the definition given in Chapter 1 above (pp. 15–16), as a faculty that exercises judgement both retrospectively by witnessing, accusing, or excusing past actions, and prospectively by inciting or binding one to commit or abstain from an act. When addressing natural law, Aquinas insists that humans are rational creatures participating in eternal, or divine law (ST I-II, q. 91, a. 2) (1274b). Through this rationality, they have the capacity to distinguish between good and evil (ST I-II, Q 94, a2) (Aquinas, 1274c). The essential point is that all people have access to fundamental moral principles through reason. Thus, rightful intention and moral discernment of individual combatants are crucial because they are rational agents endowed with a conscience that participates in the divine law, capable of distinguishing right from wrong and ultimately accountable to God for their actions in war.

Next is Hugo Grotius, who was a humanist, author, and jurist also interpreting natural law to form his theories and he greatly influenced modern international law (Brown et al., 2002, pp. 325–327). He developed concepts of proper conduct within war but he shifted the focus on to the sovereign authority and formal legality of such a war in his work, *On the Law of War and Peace* (Brown et al., 2012, pp. 329–330; Grotius, 2012a, pp. 339–349). Grotius attempts to ground his work in reason versus solely divine command in the *Prolegomena* (2012/1625, para. 11, p. 341). Then, highlighting this shift of moral responsibility to the sovereign, he notably treats combatants more as tools of war, as in Book I, Chapter 5, when he discusses combatants as the instruments that carry out the will of the sovereign (Grotius, 2012b, p. 77). However, Grotius still finds that combatants ultimately answer to God for their unjust actions, despite being instruments of the state, saying, “In consequence, the persons who knowingly perform such acts, or co-operate in them, are to be considered of the number of those who cannot reach the Kingdom of Heaven without repentance” (Grotius, 2012b, p. 384). Where Aquinas’ treatment of combatants as individuals is reflected in modern revisionist just war theory, Grotius work aligns more with modern traditional just war theory.

Another jurist whose work should be mentioned as foundational to just war theory and international law was Emmerich de Vattel (Brown et al., 2012, pp. 336–337). Vattel built on Grotius’s legalist tradition, writing instrumental work that framed international law as an extension of natural law, developing concepts of just conduct in war while arguing for the importance of proportionality, and the unjust nature of killing non-combatants indiscriminately (Brown et al., 2012, p. 337; Vattel, 1797, Book 3, ch VIII, (pp. 549-551), IX). Vattel fully embraces the equivalence of combatants, treating them as equal lawful participants,

It is the duty of subjects to suppose them just and wise, until clear and absolute evidence tells them the contrary. When, therefore, under the impression of such an idea, they have lent their assistance in a war which is afterwards found to be unjust, the sovereign alone is guilty: he alone is bound to repair the injuries. The subjects, and in particular the military, are innocent: they have acted only from a necessary obedience. (Book III, § 187) (Vattel, 1797, p. 588)

In his formulation of just conduct, combatants who follow lawful orders are shielded legally from the wrongs of their violence regardless of the just or unjust nature of the war, but Vattel does not remove accountability to one’s conscience and God (Vattel, 1797, p. 542).

Natural law was formative to early development of *jus in bello*, centering on the moral and spiritual gravity of killing in war. This stands in contrast to the legal focus seen in modern institutional-legal regulations implementing *jus in bello*. These prioritize objective standards of lawful conduct. Here, I suggest further research targeting a deeper review of natural law and how the contrast might provide a more meaningful and sustained way to analyze experiences of moral injury, guilt, and betrayal. Modern institutions do not ignore these problems, but they are not built to address them at the individual level either.

The traditions of *jus in bello*, are foundational pillars of legal institutions and they have been interpreted to construct organizations minimizing suffering and to protect non-combatants during armed conflicts. These aims are reflected in historical treaties such as in the *Geneva Conventions* preamble (*The Geneva Conventions of 12 AUGUST 1949*, 1949, pp. 19–20). Principles include proportionality, the requirement to distinguish legitimate military targets (combatants versus civilians), and the prohibition of unethical methods or weapons of force—for example, restrictions on the kinds of weaponry used, or prohibition of torture and genocide. Numerous treaties targeting specific types of weaponry, like chemical or biological weapons, explicitly spell out that their aim is to “[mitigate] the horrors of war” (*Biological Weapons Convention*, n.d., p. 1). This reflects a commitment to the value of human life by protecting from unnecessary physical suffering and also guarding against the trauma that combatants endure as a result of employing and witnessing inhumane methods of violence and grotesque violations of humanity. These treaties and conventions indirectly recognize the humanity and suffering of combatants, to include moral injury. Unfortunately, violence of war is inevitable, and nearly guarantees combatant suffering on an individual level. Overall, *jus in bello* principles aim to reduce violence and killing, and second to constrain brutality in war; together they strike a balance between employing combatants as effective instruments of war while preserving their humanity to the extent possible under the circumstances. Reducing the gruesome and disproportionate use of vile weaponry is crucial, but combatants must kill others, regardless.

3.1.1 Challenging the Clarity of Just War Distinctions – Richard Norman

In his book *Ethics, Killing and War*, Richard Norman points out that within *jus in bello*, if the distinction between combatant and non-combatant is predicated on

'innocence,' "a clear and morally relevant division" is difficult to discern (R. Norman, 1995, p. 159). Many people within the military construct could be considered innocent (for example, cooks), and the converse—there are those in the civilian population with close ties to the military industrial complex or those who are responsible for an unjust political party in power who may not be so innocent (R. Norman, 1995, pp. 159, 167). Norman argues that *jus ad bellum* cannot be easily isolated from *jus in bello* (1995, p. 161). Modern war inevitably involves non-combatant victims, and involuntary conscripts can be considered innocent, and thus modern wars kill droves of innocent people (R. Norman, 1995, pp. 160–161). Norman takes issue with the contrast between innocent and guilty in war. Fighting for an unjust cause under this pretense indicates guilt, and consequently, the distinction between *jus in bello* and *jus ad bellum* is in question, in much the same way as Jeff McMahan argues, discussed later.

Norman constructs a social model of moral responsibility, arguing that moral responsibility hinges on social relationships, which can both limit and share moral responsibility with others (R. Norman, 1995, pp. 104–111). Throughout his work, he discusses the nuance of war and determines that the ethical evaluation of combatants' actions requires more distinction than simply assuming a blanket of moral equivalence over all combatants. As he states, "Combatants must presumably always bear some responsibility for the prosecution of the war, but the extent of their responsibility can vary considerably" (R. Norman, 1995, p. 172). Extrapolating from this social model of moral responsibility, the relationships surrounding a combatant can change their sense of moral accountability, as exemplified by Eichmann's case presented above in Chapter 2. Additionally, Norman's model supports my claim that leaders higher in the chain of command bear a greater burden of moral responsibility due to their closer relational ties to the institutional-legal domain (more on this later).

3.1.2 A Revisionist Approach – Jeff McMahan

Contrasting the nuanced view of moral conduct in war, Jeff McMahan sets an argument that broadly opposes the concept of combatant moral equivalency. McMahan presents a revisionist approach to just war theory, preferring to put more moral responsibility on combatants for their actions. He opposes the transference of responsibility from combatants to the leaders and politicians and believes people are responsible for their own actions, regardless of whether they differentiate

between military and civilian targets, apply force in proportion to the situation, or prevent undue suffering (2009). McMahan argues that the morality of killing in war is equivalent to the morality of killing in everyday life; combatants are not excused from the fundamental moral wrong of killing on the mere basis that they are combatants in war. He maintains that *jus in bello* is not logically separate from *jus ad bellum*, and he broadly opposes the concept of combatant moral equivalency. In his book *Killing in War*, he argues that combatants fighting an unjust war do not satisfy *jus in bello* constraints, because they violate both the principle of discrimination and the principle of proportionality (McMahan, 2009, pp. 18, 24). If the cause of the war is unjust, then the fighting those combatants do is also unjust. McMahan illustrates this point further by discussing the Russia-Ukraine War, emphasizing that Russian combatants attacked Ukrainians unprovoked, none of whom—military members and civilians alike—had done anything to make themselves morally liable to such attack (2024, pp. 55–56). In this example, he acknowledges that “many [Russian soldiers] have been deceived by government propaganda or act under duress, or both. These conditions do not affect the objective wrongness of their action[s]” (McMahan, 2024, p. 56). McMahan points out in earlier work that with modern of technology and communication, individual combatants have sufficient access to information about the just or unjust nature of the war they are fighting, and therefore they cannot claim ignorance as an excuse for continued participation (2010, p. 17). According to revisionist theory, all violence committed by Russian combatants against Ukrainians, with very few exceptions, is morally wrong (McMahan, 2024, p. 56).

For the combatant, this approach indicates that their own individual moral code must take priority over that imposed on them. His approach treats combatants much more like individuals than objects of war. However, if McMahan’s approach is possible, combatants would be required to resist adopting the sociocultural values surrounding them. This subverts the institutional-legal domain of moral conduct entirely and assumes combatants can maintain their identity regardless of the sociocultural atmosphere they are immersed in. Rectifying the gap in institutional-legal support for the independent moral decision making of a combatant, McMahan wrote a piece titled “The Prevention of Unjust Wars” (2010). Here he pointed out that virtually all wars have at least one unjust side, and thus proposed to establish an international and independent juridical structure that legally discerned the nature of

a war as just or unjust, calling it the “ad bellum court” (McMahan, 2010, pp. 4, 9). His discussion thoroughly assesses practical application and resists “punishing ordinary combatants merely for participation in an unjust war” (McMahan, 2010, p. 9). Rather, this legal institution would provide support and justification to all those resisting an unjust war, ranging from individual combatants to organizations and states, by offering information necessary to assess a war’s justness and establish moral grounds to refuse fighting (McMahan, 2010, pp. 10–11).

While McMahan’s proposal makes strides toward reconciling a combatant’s individual morals with the values of an unjust war force, what he describes is still a broad institution that requires relationships to trickle down from an international institutional-legal level to the individual combatant. Such a legal body might offer meaningful support, but the proposed structure of this institution remains distant to the combatant, both in terms of access to information and its limited applicability within non-democratic political systems. McMahan’s revisionist philosophy regards combatants as individuals with personal moral codes which persist despite separate moral expectations within war, and his proposal would provide an avenue to reduce suffering and thus moral injury. By recognizing that the morality of killing remains unchanged in combat, he implicitly acknowledges that combatants serving on the just side of a war might also experience moral injury. Regrettably, even allowing individual regard for how combatants experience war, institutions still fail to fully reach a combatant via meaningful relationships without a sociocultural surrounding (military unit and structure) that supports that intent.

3.1.3 A Traditional Approach – Michael Walzer

Michael Walzer’s book *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* presents a comprehensive and modern summary of traditional just war theory (2006). Walzer’s doctrine states that soldiers are morally equivalent in war and that their actions should be evaluated outside of the context of the cause of the war they fight in. He claims that combatants’ shared humanity is part of what makes them equivalent, and this harmonizes with the indiscriminate nature of moral injury (Walzer, 2006, p. 37). Moral injury occurs irrespective of combatant affiliation. An ordinary combatant, as opposed to a leader/decision maker, is not responsible for the political strategy or decisions that lead to conflict. The fact that moral injuries are indiscriminate in war underscore combatant victimhood, common humanity, and

common suffering. Their moral equivalence, Walzer asserts, still holds combatants accountable for their actions; they do not serve mindlessly and maintain agency despite their moral equivalence, but they are equal in their misery in war. "Soldiers cannot endure modern warfare for long without blaming someone for their pain and suffering" (Walzer, 2006, p. 36). Here, Walzer illustrates the figurative distance between combatants and those he finds responsible for war. In practice, this distance simply does not relieve soldiers from moral injury.

Later, Walzer devotes a section to what he calls the "naked soldier" through a series of examples where soldiers did not want to kill someone, someone whom they had cause to kill under just conduct within war. The "naked soldier" explains the phenomenon where combatants recognize the vulnerability or humanity in each other, and this contributes to a reluctance to kill (Walzer, 2006, pp. 138–143). On the topic Walzer says, "no doubt, a deep psychological uneasiness about killing plays a part in these cases" (Walzer, 2006, p. 139). Walzer also observes that this refusal to kill enemy combatants might be taken as contrary to military duty. However, reluctance of combatants to kill involves recognition of a moral wrong and shows the individual nature of moral decision making (Walzer, 2006, pp. 138–143). From this discussion, I arrive at similar conclusions about the nature of moral injury: the humanity that lives inside the combatant does not change in war; instead, the combatant must work to overcome such feelings to execute the orders of war. Walzer endorses politicians bearing the responsibility for the tough decisions in war, stating, "Political leaders can hardly help but choose the utilitarian side of the dilemma. That is what they are there for" (Walzer, 2006, p. 326). Leaders are not immersed in the same tumultuous and violent circumstances as combatants, even when dealing with their most difficult moral dilemmas. They face administrative and policy decisions. Even *ad bellum* decisions they make do not typically result in their own immersion in violence—only the troops they control are at risk. Walzer argues that part of a leader's role is to personally shoulder the moral burden (2006, p. 326). However, politicians and statesmen do not effectively alleviate combatants from the moral weight of killing. Combatants must kill each other, regardless.

Walzer asserts that war is not a natural occurrence but a social creation (2006, p. 24). Thus, the ethics of war should not be considered an operation under an inherent or natural set of moral laws; rather, institutions and conventions that human beings invent or agree on shapes the ethics of war (Walzer, 2006, pp. xxi,

xxii). This is part of the difficulty that humans have deciding what is ethically correct when establishing moral conventions of war. I assert that Norman's view—that war suspends the universal moral conviction that killing is fundamentally wrong—paired with the idea that war is a human construct, points to a deeper insight (R. Norman, 1995, p. 39). War, as a socio-political confrontation, involves forms of aggression and violence that exceed the boundaries of our innate ethical and moral norms. Violating our intrinsic respect for life cannot be reconciled by any moral code that we create for war, even if we all were to agree on one manner of conducting just war. This all points to our need for an objective set of institutions and laws governing ethical conduct within war. If it is not something that can be intrinsically understood or easily navigated, we require concrete frameworks to dictate the best and most ethical methods that curb the totality of suffering that is war.

3.2 Legal Frameworks and Their Relation to Military Leaders: The U.S. as a Case Study

Traditionally, *jus ad bellum* holds those with the authority to decide to go to war morally responsible (Johnson, 2017; Walzer, 2006, pp. 325–326). Ultimately, just war tradition finds state leaders and politicians who decide to wage war responsible for the consequences, even if they adhere to the most morally upstanding reasonings for entering war. In studying just war theory, one might think or assume that the moral framework for combatants' conduct via *jus in bello* or legal frameworks that uphold those principles might reconcile the misalignment between personal morals and wartime actions. Nevertheless, as moral injury highlights, combatants still struggle mentally to deal with wartime experiences. In the best-case scenario, a leader makes the most ethical decision within a war, and her conscience is clear.⁷ But her subordinates are still impacted by violence and are exposed to potentially morally injurious experiences regardless of the morality of the decision. The institutions cannot protect every single combatant from all possible violence or injustice. They are there to protect from greater suffering, such as the example of treaties banning chemical and biological weapons. They cannot eliminate suffering entirely.

⁷ Cases of moral injury among leadership fall outside the scope of this thesis and are left future research.

In the United States military, the *Department of Defense Law of War Manual* (Law of War) provides the official interpretation of international law related to *jus in bello* principles, and the interpretation on the applicability of treaties and customary international law with respect to the U.S. DoD operation. The Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) is the criminal code used when the Law of War is violated (*Commander's Legal Handbook 2019*, 2019, pp. 7–8; *Department of Defense Law of War Manual*, 2023, p. 1; Reitz, 2024, Chapter 25 p. 508). The corps of attorneys that serve in the U.S. military is the Judge Advocate General Corps (JAG, but the term “JAG” is used colloquially to mean either the entire corps or a single officer).

The Judge Advocate General's Legal Center & School for the U.S. Army publishes *The Commander's Legal Handbook* as a legal reference for U.S. Army commanders. This resource outlines the nature of the relationship that the JAG has with their respective leadership. JAG officers function as a guide for military commanders as decision makers. Similar to legal advisors in the civilian sector, the JAG cannot make decisions for leaders they advise. Rather, they inform them of the parameters of the law with respect to their decisions and also remind their advisees of the repercussions of not following the law. For example, in the United States, a military commander may be reprimanded by Congress and required to testify, during which, the advising JAG officer would also testify and share what legal advice they gave their advisee. A significant difference from the civilian sector is that in the Department of Defense,

The commander plays a quasi-judicial role in the system, making decisions that in the civilian sector would be made by professional prosecutors or judges. Commanders must remain neutral and detached from the circumstances and make the best decision for the unit, the Soldier, and the interest of justice. (*Commander's Legal Handbook 2019*, 2019, p. 10)

Therefore, the commander of a unit needs a close relationship with their JAG office in order to effectively and justly navigate the UCMJ system.

Documents like *The Commander's Legal Handbook*, and sparse military education courses that officers take in which they learn about the JAG and UCMJ are practically the only tools that prepare a commander to act as a judicial representative. Otherwise, they have no formal legal education and limited professional training in these matters, exemplifying a tenuous relationship between the institutions and the combatants subordinate to them. The commander of a unit is something of a point of failure, particularly if they themselves are not held

responsible for failing in their judicial duties or failing to uphold good discipline and order within their unit.

3.2.1 Relationships

Figure 7 is a graphic representation of the ordinary combatant and her potential relationships to the institutional-legal domain governing the ethical conduct within war. The orange sequence reaching nearest to the “self” in this case represents that combatant’s relationship with their commander and chain of command, since they have judicial duties. Other relationships lie within the larger and larger unit sizes, similar to Figure 5: *Social & Relational Identity Visualization* from Chapter 2. These more detached relationships represent, for example, other unit commanders they may interact with in passing, possibly a cursory course of Professional Military Education about the UCMJ, or a relationship to the colleague that is responsible for briefing the in-theater rules of engagement (ROEs). It is not to say that combatants do not know the applicable ROEs or principles of the Law of War, but their relation to the source document is not typically part of their identity.

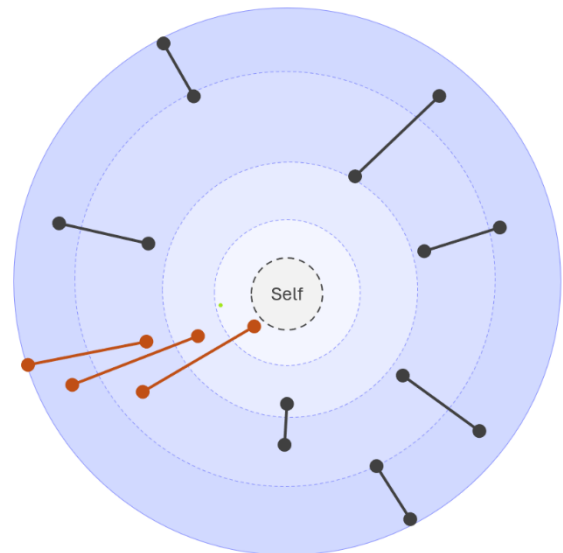


Figure 7: Combatant-Institution Relationship Visualization

Within the complex military hierarchy, commanders and unit leaders are also responsible for their unit’s sociocultural atmosphere (*Commander’s Legal Handbook 2019*, 2019, p. 7). Though the leader is not the sole influence on the unit’s atmosphere, they are responsible for it and mold it based on their leadership style and philosophy. Negligence to this duty and to their duty to be bearers of the institutional-legal domain of just conduct within war can lead to grievous lapses in moral judgement within the fog of war, such as the U.S. military prisoner abuse scandal at Abu Ghraib in 2004.

3.2.2 When Moral Institutions Fail – Abu Ghraib

Grievous failures of moral institutions exhibit the fragility of the relationships that span the gap between the *Individual* and the *Institutional-Legal* on the *Combatant-Institution Proximity Framework*. The U.S. military prison abuse scandal at Abu Ghraib is evidence that the relationship between the institutional-legal domain of moral conduct and the leadership hierarchy is tenuous. It also supports the model of identity presented in Chapter 2, drawing parallels to the Eichmann case. To limit the scope, I use Jeffrey Addicott's article published in 2006, which presents a thorough overview of pertinent legal reports and findings, following the prosecution and conviction of the nine primary enlisted members accused of abuse (n.d.). As a result of only this scandal, 300 cases of abuse were reported, and as of August 2004, 66 cases were substantiated (Addicott, n.d., p. 51). The abuse was perpetrated by nine reservists all from the same unit and all serving the night shift at Tier 1 in Abu Ghraib. Their unit arrived at Abu Ghraib in October of 2004, and according to the whistleblower, upon arrival they immediately witnessed mistreatment of prisoners already occurring (Hylton, 2006). This account was further validated by complaints the Red Cross provided to U.S. officials dating as early as November 2003 (Addicott, n.d., p. 44). It is hard to believe that the nine convicted enlisted members acted as rogue agents when an atmosphere void of repercussions already existed upon their arrival.

This group of individuals on the night shift at Tier 1 seems to have adopted some identity within their small unit that lacked moral decency and human empathy. Their actions went beyond the bureaucratic banal evil of Eichmann that Arendt describes, but their behavior was equally devoid of proper moral judgement. Without having an assessment of these perpetrators' instances of moral injury in the wake of these events, it is reasonable to assume that their small group sociocultural atmosphere was permissive of such violations, similar to Eichmann's case. The whistleblower's experience was made especially onerous by the isolation that came with retaining a sound moral compass in an environment that had abandoned it. According to an interview he gave in 2006, the whistleblower had originally been guaranteed anonymity, but this was violated abruptly while he was still serving with the unit he had reported on. Even after seeing grotesque pictures of the abuse that was occurring, the majority of peer combatants surrounding him viewed him as a

snitch, even his family and hometown sided with the abusers out of some misplaced sense of patriotism or devotion to American soldiers over Iraqi prisoners (Hylton, 2006). This phenomenon is a manifestation of widespread sociocultural dehumanization of the prisoners.

Leadership at the prison either knew about prisoner abuse and did nothing to prevent it, or did not know about the abuse, but should have known as a matter of their duty to lead (Addicott, n.d., p. 50). In all cases it was found that no commander within the perpetrators' chain of command gave any order, written or verbal, to commit these abuses (Addicott, n.d., pp. 63–67). Either way, reports found the leadership culpable at the “tactical” level (meaning the immediate hands-on supervisors and commanders of those committing the abuse), but as of Addicott's article, no judicial proceedings had found officials guilty of crimes violating the UCMJ. Reports absolved senior officials and military authorities (Addicott, n.d., pp. 68–70). In the end, all 9 individuals involved were found guilty as of September 2005 (Addicott, n.d., p. 47).

The military leadership hierarchy bridges the gap between the individual combatant and the institutional-legal domain. Events of Abu Ghraib bolster this argument by exposing that there were no other tethers to moral institutions when leadership catastrophically failed to uphold morality in the unit. The upper hierarchy, military officials writing policy and issuing orders on the treatment of prisoners, must have abided by the Law of War, at least enough so that they were not found culpable in this case, even if leadership failure was cited as causal to the incident (Addicott, n.d., p. 49) As it transpired (at face value per the time of Addicott's article) the commanders—from the 800th Military Police Brigade Commander, Brigadier General Janice Karpinski—and down the chain of command to Tier 1 at Abu Ghraib either did not know or did not do anything to stop abuse at the prison. To give an idea of the scope, General Karpinski was responsible for three prisons, eight battalions, and 3,400 U.S. Army soldiers at Abu Ghraib who handled prisoners (Hersh, 2004). This entire chain of command contains several leadership levels that *should* act as proxies of the UCMJ and Law of War, and each of these leaders has access to the JAG Corps embedded. However, they all failed in their duty to utilize this relationship and to affect their units and combatants to act morally. A second possibility is a failure of leadership to represent the institutions appropriately. If it were the case that leadership *had* given illegal orders and the subordinates followed

them, this constitutes a failure in the requirement that a commander themselves *be* a custodian of military law and ethics within the institutional-legal domain. If the first failure exhibits negligence, the second is malicious ignorance, both are demonstrations of the frail relationship the institutional-legal domain has with the individual combatant.

3.2.3 Eliminating the JAG Corps

In the Abu Ghraib scandal, the timeline from whistleblower report to initiation of criminal investigation and charging personnel involved occurred swiftly (Addicott, n.d., p. 46). This demonstrates the proper application of the judicial system once an atrocity has been revealed. What if there were no JAG Corps to pursue the appropriate application of the UCMJ and Law of War? The Law of War is internationally regarded (by allies and treaty cosigners) as an acceptable formation and interpretation of the international laws and treaties it addresses. However, it is possible that a new administration of government in the United States issue a revised Department of Defense Law of War Manual which loosens its interpretation of international laws and treaties. In this case, the repercussions would consist of deep criticism internationally, and broken trust. Committees of treaties and organizations would subsequently report on U.S. non-compliance, altering international power and respect for the United States. An easier avenue to disregard the institutional-legal constructs is to rid the U.S. Department of Defense of its judicial enforcers—eliminate the JAG—or at least overhaul and minimize their role. The current U.S. Secretary of Defense, Pete Hegseth, has made it clear that his goal is to reinterpret the Law of War as well as curb the JAG Corps' role in order to make the U.S. military less restricted by these institutions (French, 2025; Lowell, 2025).

If the relationship between the chain of command and the institutions of moral conduct are already delicate and fallible, how can the institutions and laws of ethical conduct in warfare be upheld with relaxed standards? While the JAG provide crucial guidance to keep U.S. military officials from committing atrocities and war crimes, some leaders share the opinion that this kind of guidance interferes with the effectiveness of the U.S. military (Lowell, 2025). Sadly, either course of action, curbing JAG Corps effectiveness, or reinterpreting the Law of War has a second order effect of putting U.S. combatants at higher risk (French, 2025). As the risk of

atrocities being committed inevitably rises, so too does the risk of moral injury. Second, this policy move could jeopardize protections of U.S. combatants as it alienates allies.

Rounding back to moral injury, all the above points to the importance of the JAG as the implementation of the institutions of moral warfare conduct. They form the boundaries and relationships between the military hierarchy and the combatant by way of curbing and guiding leadership decision making to be within ethical bounds. This directly impacts the experience of the combatant; if a leader is restrained from ordering a combatant to commit an atrocity, the combatant is less likely to suffer moral injury.

3.3 The Helicopter Pilot, Again

I return now to the case of Lieutenant Johnson, the helicopter pilot who was ordered to participate in the killing of numerous innocent civilians, complied with the order, and suffered a lifetime of debilitating moral injury as a result. It is not clear if Lieutenant Johnson's commander received guidance from an officer of the JAG Corps prior to ordering the annihilation of a village, and ultimately it does not matter, because Lt Johnson killed others and suffered moral injury regardless. It does not matter if that commander was reprimanded or held accountable for his orders, because the suffering occurred regardless. Retroactive justice cannot help Lieutenant Johnson or any others that suffered at the hands of a leader who failed their moral duty. Without doubt, Lieutenant Johnson was distant from any semblance of an institution or law that has been erected to curb suffering in the violence of war. Combatant relationships with the institutional-legal structure are not close enough to affect their moral injury from combat, especially when combatants are treated as mere tools of war. Just war theory and *jus in bello* principles, which have been around for centuries, and enshrined in law for the majority of that time, failed to prevent this and innumerable other atrocities. War causes immense suffering of moral injury even with these institutions in place, because combatants kill others regardless.

Conclusion

At its core, moral injury is a wound that fractures an individual's identity through a shattering disruption of their deeply held personal moral framework. Combatants who suffer moral injury are casualties of war. This disruption is a profound trauma to identity that reflects a gap between the individual combatant and the institutions that shape moral conduct in war. Through the *Combatant-Institution Proximity Framework* developed in this thesis, I have traced the pathways of this dissonance from the innermost aspects of the *Individual*—via identity, shaped by personal moral beliefs and relationships, through the *Sociocultural* layer which engulfs the combatant in military hierarchical structures and unit culture—outward to the *Institutional-Legal Domain*, where philosophical institutions and international laws govern the conduct of war.

Each chapter has contributed to this framework, beginning by establishing moral injury as a distinct form of trauma resulting from acts or events of perpetration, witnessing, betrayal, and/or irresolvable moral conflict. These experiences, whether transgressed or endured, disrupt foundational moral beliefs and fracture a combatant's identity. The second chapter used this definition to interpret how moral injury fractures combatant identity while accounting for the impact of military service on social, relational, and narrative theories of identity and self. Combatants suffering from moral injury often retract inward, experiencing moral emotions like guilt and shame that distort their narrative self and lead them to withdrawal from social and relational aspects of identity. Next, I introduced the case of Adolf Eichmann to demonstrate how the sociocultural layer can insulate individuals. Then I presented a visual to illustrate the varied relationships between perpetration and symptom severity. In the final chapter, I examined the institution of just war theory and legal structures meant to uphold ethical conduct of warfare. Furthermore, I explored how the military hierarchy forms relationships that interact with both the institutional-legal domain, as well as influencing the individual combatant's experiences. All of the institutions and legal structures in Chapter 3 still failed to prevent the events that led to Lieutenant Johnson's suffering, a poignant reminder that institutions are powerless when they are not complied with by leaders in war.

A central conclusion of this work is that moral injury reveals a metaphorical distance between the individual and the institutional-legal domain of warfare—a gap

that cannot be bridged by legal codes or ethical doctrine alone. The sociocultural layer, where leaders shape unit culture, climate, and expectations, mediates this relationship. Leaders bear immense responsibility not only to uphold the principles of just war, but to foster an environment that safeguards the moral well-being of those they command. Future research should explore the sociocultural layer and emphasize the profound responsibility that military leaders hold in modeling and upholding morally sound decision making. While moral injury may never be wholly preventable, reducing its occurrence and minimizing the conditions that enable egregious moral violations and unnecessary acts of violence should remain a top priority for military commanders at all levels. Ultimately, recognizing moral injury as trauma to identity demands a renewed commitment to leadership, ethics, and humanity in the conduct of war.

To conclude this thesis, I want to speak directly to all veterans, in all of their capacities and say, **“Thank you for your service.”**

In recent years, this phrase has been semantically reclaimed by veterans and service members, commonly used in jest between friends or across social media platforms to express—sometimes sarcastically—the challenges and absurdities of military service and experiences. This usage is a tragic but light-hearted admission that *we understand each other’s misery*. When shared between friends, TYFYS becomes a moment of solidarity with a glimmer of whimsy against the weight of our profession. Commiserating with each other’s emotions in rage, humor, or disappointment, and above all sharing an uplifting sense of mutual pity, renders a TYFYS moment humorous. Rather than triggering an instant of uncomfortable reflection on self-worth, I hope that every time any veteran hears “Thank you for your service,” the expression carries only the reminder that they are not alone.

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Appendix 1: Abstract, Annotation, Keywords, and Estonian Abstract

Abstract

Moral injury fractures the core of a combatant's identity and disrupts their capacity for meaning-making. In the wake of violent and morally complex events of war, those who suffer from moral injury often have difficulty living with themselves or commit suicide. This thesis develops the *Combatant-Institution Proximity Framework*, a three-tier model that illustrates the metaphorical distance between the individual combatant and the institutional-legal domain of moral conduct in war. Chapter 1 establishes a moral injury as a form of trauma, arising from events of perpetration, betrayal, witnessing, or irresolvable moral conflict. Chapter 2 analyzes combatant identity through social, relational, and narrative theories, showing how symptoms of moral injury sever ties to meaningful identities and relationships, demonstrating that the sociocultural domain engulfs a combatant. Chapter 3 explores institutional and legal frameworks, including just war theory and the U.S. JAG Corps. Throughout, case studies highlight leadership's dual role enforcing institutional moral standards, and cultivating a moral climate within their unit. Ultimately, this thesis argues that moral injury exposes the gap between their personal beliefs and the morals that the institutions and laws of ethical warfare strive to uphold. The framework developed aids in understanding this gap.

Annotation

This thesis argues that moral injury exposes the gap between combatant's personal beliefs and the morals that the institutions and laws of ethical warfare strive to uphold. The *Combatant-Institution Proximity Framework* models the metaphorical distance between individuals and the institutional-legal domain of moral conduct in war. Moral injury is defined as a form of trauma rooted in perpetration, betrayal, witnessing, or irresolvable moral conflict. Analyzing combatant identity, cases, just war theory and relevant legal components like the U.S. JAG Corps, reveal leadership responsibility within the military hierarchy. This framework clarifies why institutional morals often fail to align with personal belief.

Keywords: moral injury, trauma, just war, combatant identity

Võitleja ja institutsiooni lähedusraamistik kui tööriist moraalse kahjustuse mõistmiseks sõjas

Abstrakt

Moraalne kahjustus lõhub võitleja identiteedi tuuma ja häirib tema võimet luua tähendust. Vägivaldsete ja moraalselt keeruliste sõjasündmuste järel on moraalse kahjustuse all kannatajatel sageli raskusi endaga koos elamisega või nad sooritavad enesetapu. Magistritöö pakub välja võitleja ja institutsiooni lähedusraamistiku (*Combatant-Institution Proximity Framework*) ehk kolmetasandilise mudeli, mis illustreerib distantse üksikvõitleja ja institutsionaalse ning õigusliku tasandi vahel, mis reguleerib käitumist sõjas. Esimene peatükk määratleb moraalse kahjustuse kui trauma, mis tuleneb moraalinõuete rikkumisest, selle pealtnägemisest, reetmisest, või lahendamatu moraalsest konfliktist. Teine peatükk analüüsib võitleja identiteeti sotsiaalsete, suhetega seotud ja narratiivsete teooriate kaudu, Peatükis näidatakse, kuidas moraalse kahjustuse sümptomid katkestavad seosed tähenduslike identiteetide ja suhetega, ning millisel viisil sotsiaalne ja kultuuriline raamistik ümbritseb võitlejat. Kolmas peatükk uurib institutsionaalseid ja õiguslikke raamistikke, sealhulgas õiglase sõja teooriat ja USA JAG-korpust. Juhtumiuuringud toovad esile liidrite kahetise rolli: institutsionaalsete moraalinormide jõustamine ja moraalse kliima loomine oma üksuses. Lõppkokkuvõttes väidab väitekiri, et moraalne kahjustus paljastab lõhe isiklike veendumuste ja moraali vahel, mida eetilise sõjapidamise institutsioonid ja seadused üritavad tagada. Magistritöös välja pakutud teoreetiline raamistik aitab seda lõhet mõista.

Appendix 2: Figures and Images

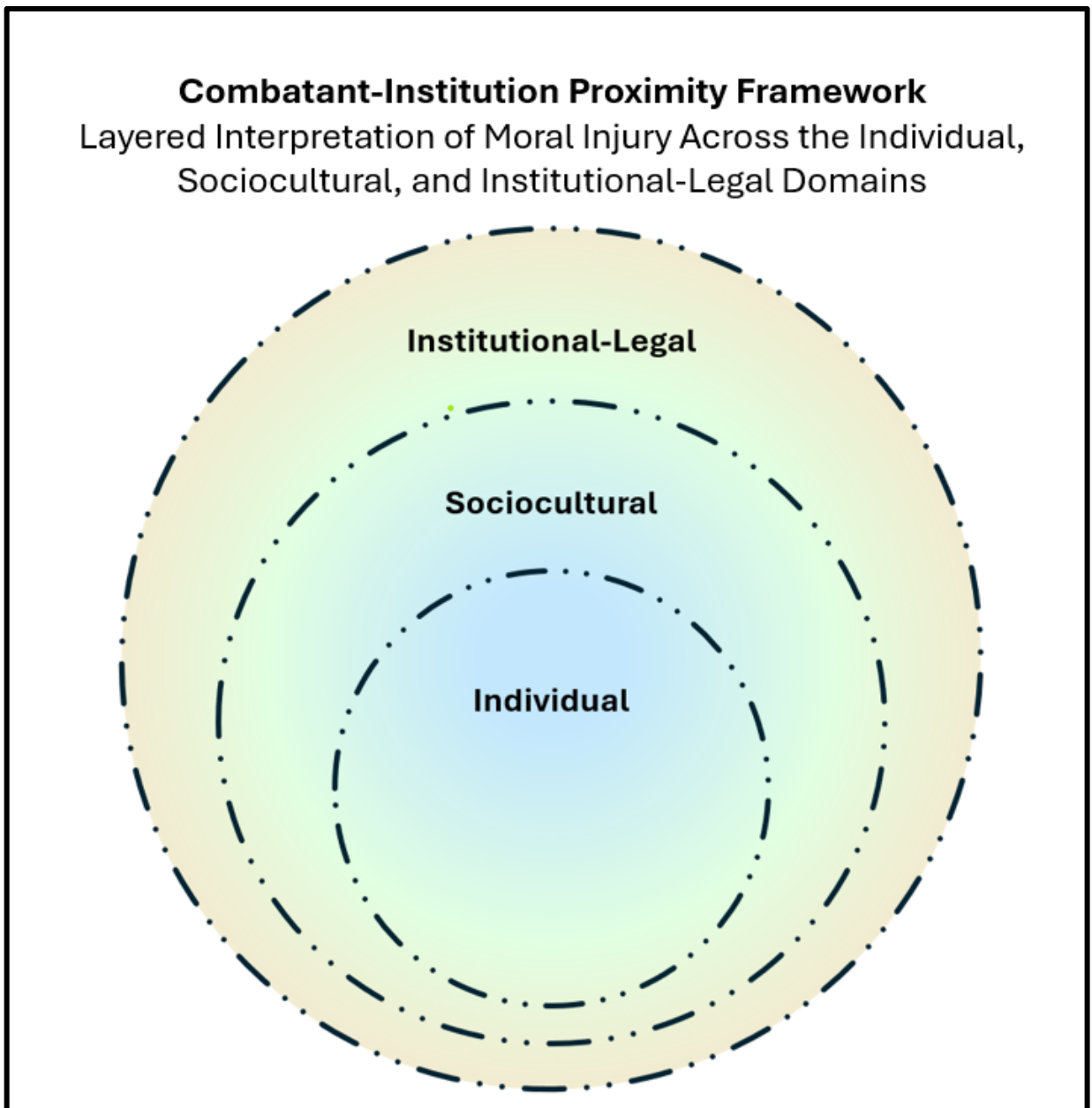


Figure 1

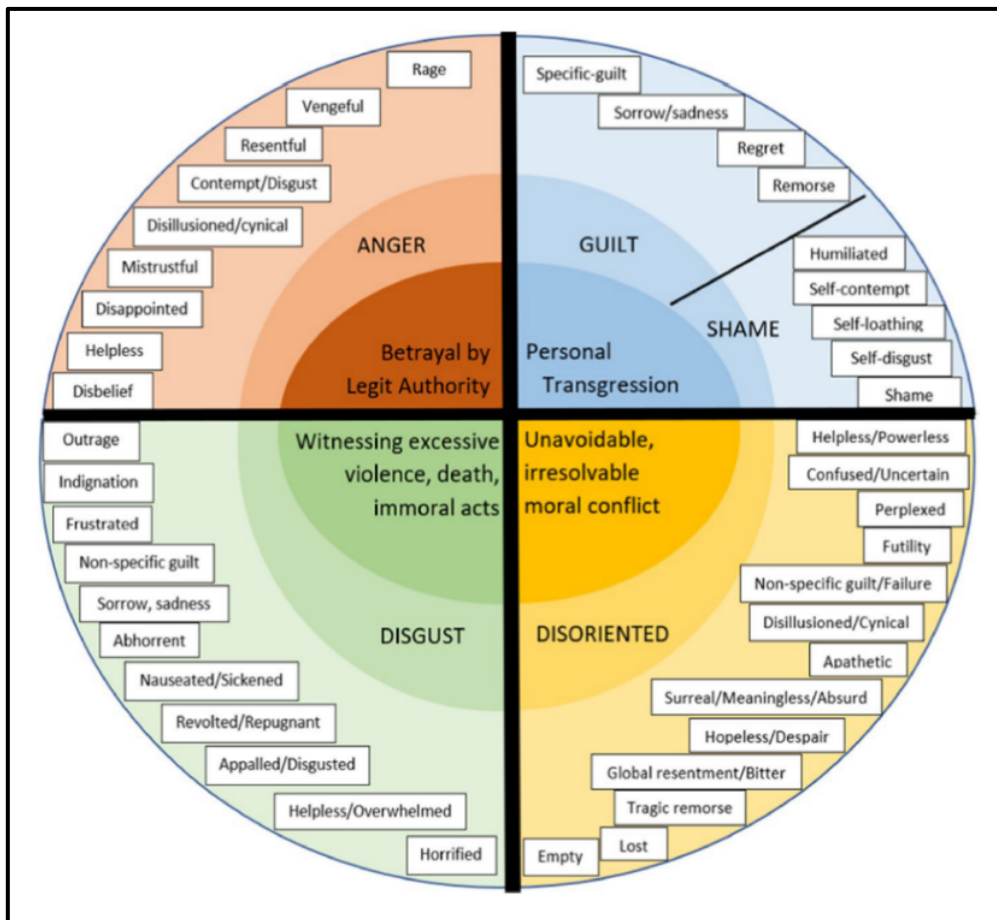


Figure 2: Moral Injury Experience Wheel (Fleming, 2023, p. 205)

NOTE: Use of this figure has been explicitly approved by its author. Further use of it requires permission from the author.

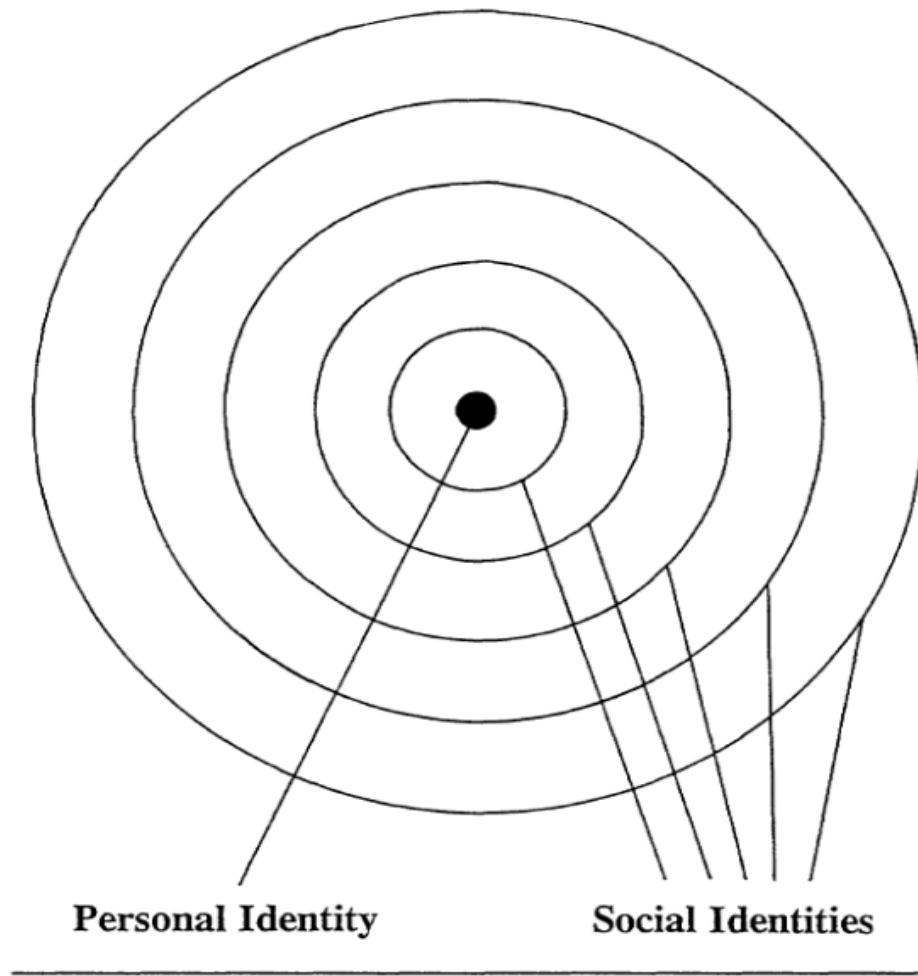


Figure 3: Personal and social identities (Brewer, 1991, p. 476)

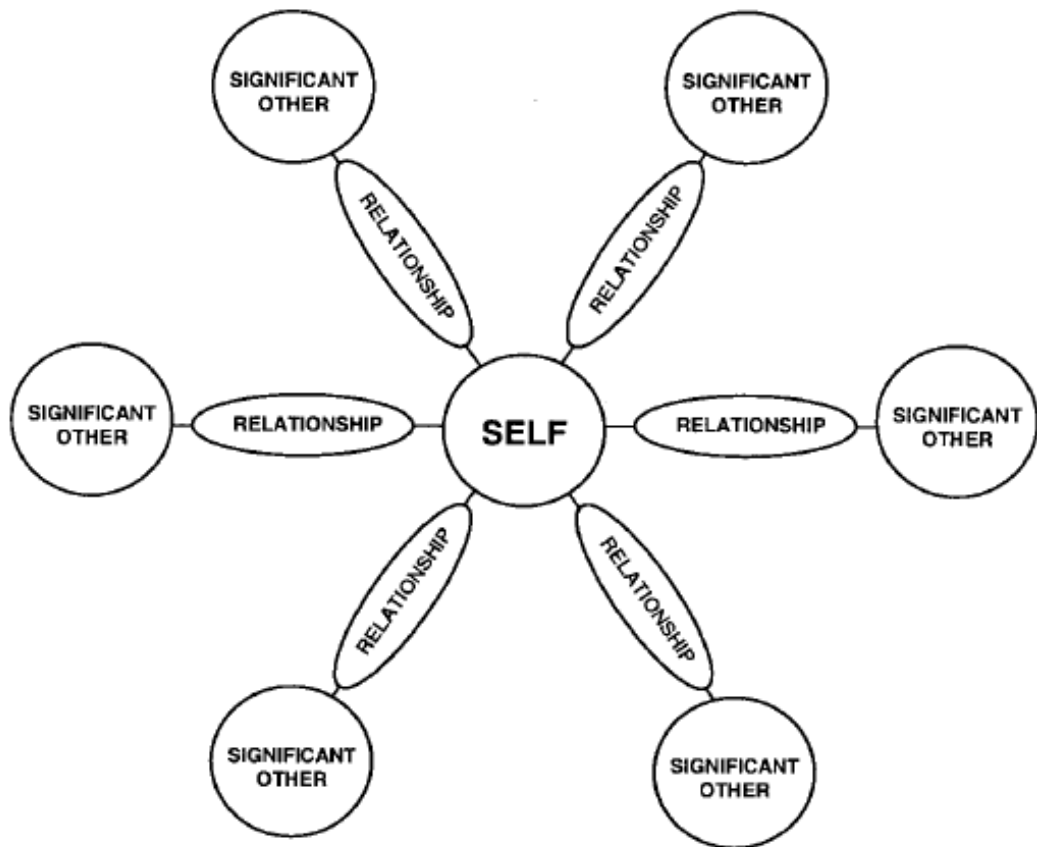


Figure 4: Linkages between the self and significant-other representations in memory.

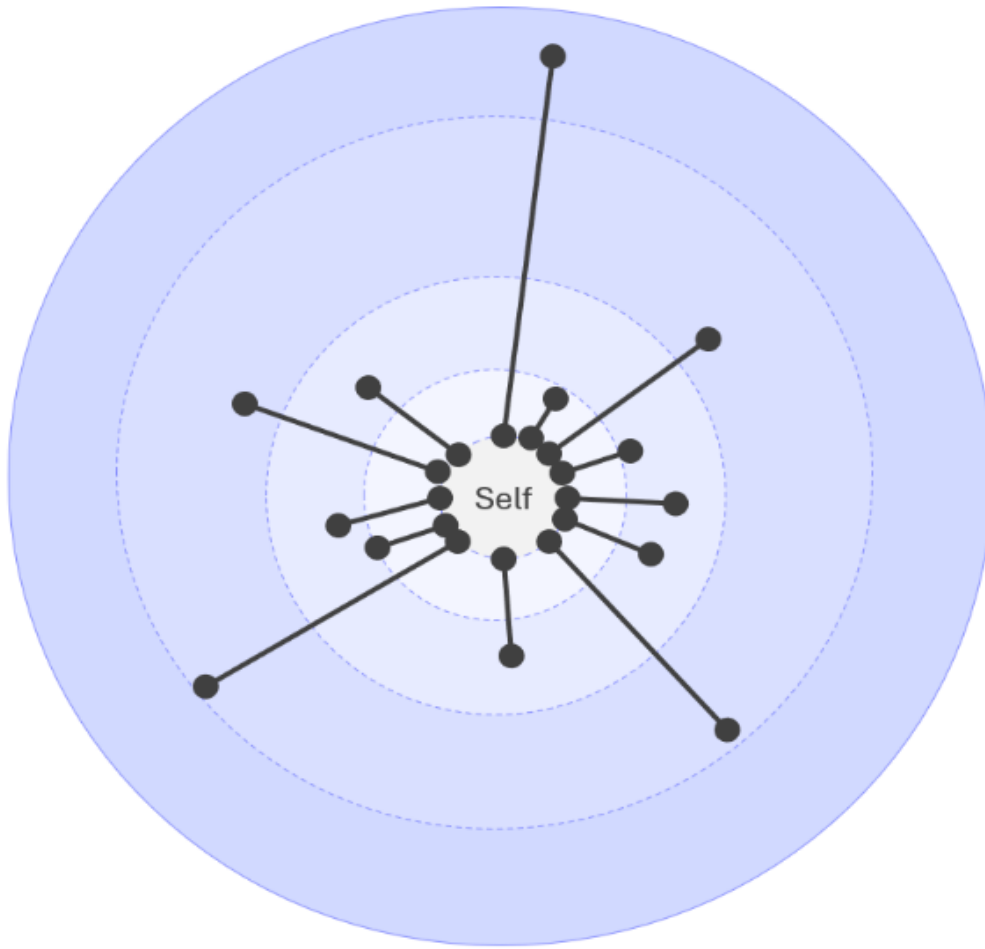


Figure 5: Social & Relational Identity Visualization

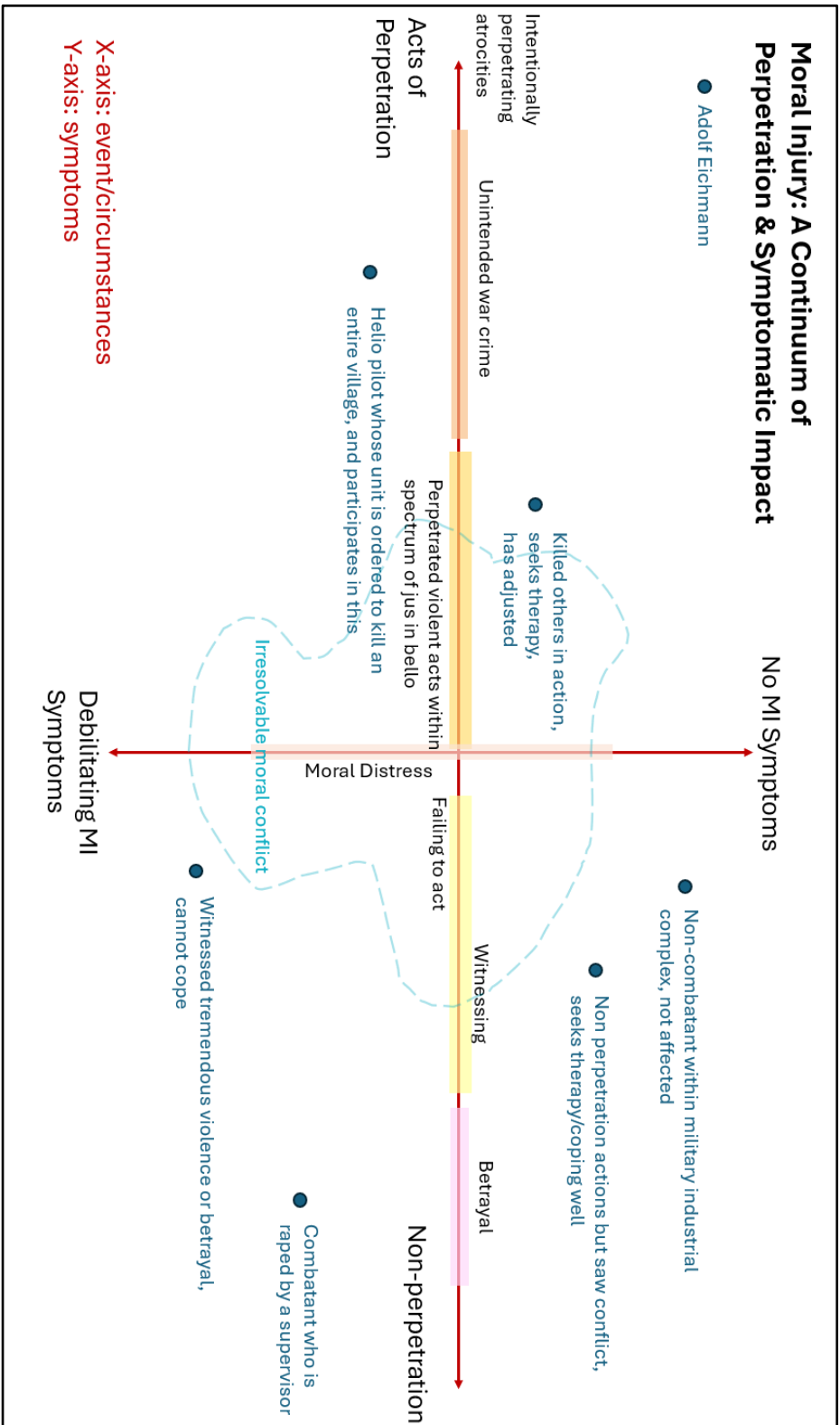


Figure 6: Combatant-Institution Relationship Visualization

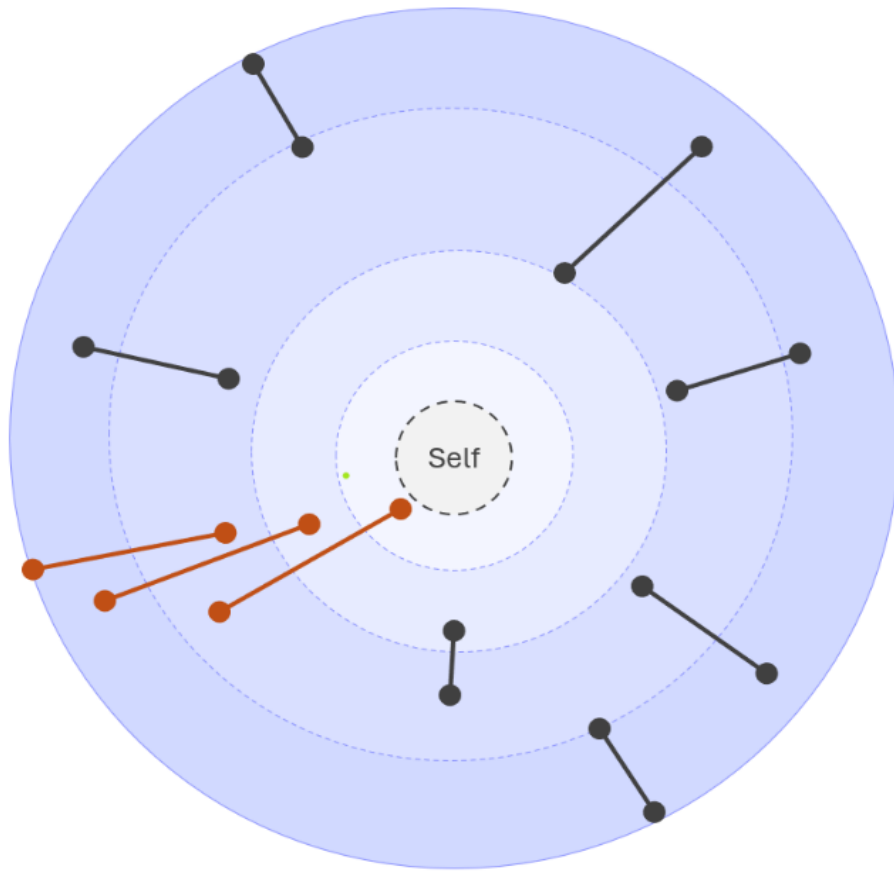


Figure 7: Combatant-Institution Relationship Visualization

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