

Envisioning recovery and re-envisioning moral injury: a theological perspective

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Re-envisioning moral injury

This paper outlines a re-envisioned understanding of moral injury:

as the *shattering* of an individual's moral *expectation(s)*, that in turn triggers the *implosion* of their *morality framework*, the worldview that had previously provided the individual with their core belief system, their hope, security, identity, and organising principles of existence.

I will describe what inspired and what informs this understanding, and where this is located; before going on to suggest how this re-envisioning contributes towards strategies for both prevention and repair.

The shattering and the implosion in the Book of Jonah – the inspiration

Jonah's desperate *suicidal ideation* at the end of the Book of Jonah resonates loudly with many who struggle with moral injury.

To recap his story, Jonah was told by the Lord to go prophesy against Nineveh, the modern-day city of Mosul in Northern Iraq, a city and the region, familiar for many veterans of the recent conflict in the Middle East. Immediately after the Lord spoke to him, Jonah gets on a ship going the opposite direction, but the Lord catches up with him with a huge storm. Frightened sailors throw Jonah overboard, he is swallowed by a big fish, and after three days, he finds himself, on his way to Nineveh. Then, in that great city, Jonah goes to perform his prophetic task with an underwhelming sense of enthusiasm. He goes only one day's journey into the city that takes three days to walk across, and 'proclaims', more like mumbles, "three days, and this city will be destroyed" – no details, instructions, he didn't even mention the name of the Lord. But, astonishingly, the people of Nineveh and their king heard this whispered and garbled message, and they repented. And even worse for Jonah, the Lord

relents from destroying Nineveh, because they repented. Thus, we come to Jonah at the end of the book telling the Lord – “And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” (Jonah 3.3.)

Behind the Book, is the historical fact that Jonah and his people had endured generations of colonial oppression and cruelty, so much so, that their understanding of Lord’s covenant love (hesed), included the destruction and annihilation of their hated enemies.

Jonah’s moral expectation then, was that Lord will prove that love by destroying Nineveh, repentant or not. So, he sat outside Nineveh and waited – but nothing happened. The city *stood*; his moral expectation was *utterly shattered*.

This then leads Jonah into the implosion, the implosion of his theological framework which had previously provided Jonah and his people with their core belief system, their hope, security, identity, and organising principles of existence. And while the shattering of his moral expectation was very visible, and audible, Jonah argued, complained, and moaned to the Lord, the implosion is silent. The Book of Jonah ends with Jonah still sitting outside, in Northern Iraq, windblown, dehydrated, and *silent*.

This was the sign of his implosion – the sounds of silence. Liz Boaz says:

Words fail, ...when the world no longer makes sense. Words fail, when meaning has collapsed. Words fail for Jonah when God seems to be on the side of the oppressors.¹

Trauma is a significant topic in the Old Testament books like Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Kathleen O’Conner speaks of this traumatic place of silence not as a place of emptiness, but a place full of broken memories that no longer fit together, where “memories like menacing ghosts, agitate and stomp around in the mind, as if they were alive with a will of their own”.²

Our morality framework provides us with our core belief system, hope and identity. And they give us a sense of security and guidance, yet, the *fragments* of imploded morality framework, now disconnected from their original meaning, only serve to accuse and to condemn.

The only thing Jonah knows in this space, is that his former understanding of the Lord’s hesed makes no sense at all - *his world has now imploded*.

¹ Elizabeth Boase, "'Whispered in the sound of silence': traumatising the book of Jonah," *The Bible & Critical Theory* 12 (2016-01-01 2016). 6.

² Kathleen M. O'Connor, "Teaching Jeremiah," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 36, no. 3 (Fall 2009). 277.

The recognition of multiple levels and contexts – in forming moral beliefs and values

While the Book of Jonah *inspired* this understanding, it is Tine Molendijk's anthropological perspective on the nature and formation of moral beliefs that *informs* this understanding.

The key insight here is that none of our moral frameworks is consistent and harmonious *because* their components have been formed and moulded at multiple levels and contexts.

[Moral belief] is not only an intra-individual matter, but also present in different social levels (groups, organisation, nation) and in different social contexts (ethnic cultures, social and professional subcultures). An individual lives and acts on a daily basis within a range of these - often overlapping and sometimes opposing... As a result, an individual incorporates multiple sets of values and norms, which may correspond but also contradict one another.³

I used to teach military ethics and looking back, most of those interminable ethical dilemmas came about, not because they were competing moral values as such, but because they *represented* multiple *layers* of moral values – that refuse to be flattened down into a mere two-dimensional, harmonious, deontological system.

And this is what makes it difficult to articulate and describe our moral frameworks, their lack of consistency makes them opaque. In this context, however, the term “*moral expectations*” offers a useful way to discuss our multi-layered morality. The reason being, while it might be hard to talk about moral values in terms, beyond abstract generalities, most of us are very clear as to what our moral expectations might be, of ourselves (and of others) in any given moral circumstances.

In this, I submit that there is a bi-directional relationship between *moral framework* and *moral expectations*.

That is to say –

- Moral expectations are formed by our internal moral framework – therefore, the expectations make *visible* our opaque internal framework.

³ Tine Molendijk, Eric-Hans Kramer, and Désirée Verweij, "Moral Aspects of 'Moral Injury': Analysing Conceptualizations on the Role of Morality in Military Trauma," Journal Article, *Journal of Military Ethics* 17, no. 1 (2018). 41. See also Tine Molendijk, *Moral Injury and Soldiers in Conflict: Political practices and public perceptions*, ed. Michael L Gross and James Pattison, War, Conflict and Ethics, (London, UK: Routledge, 2021). 6.

- And in life, when our moral expectations are not met, we tend to adjust them, and that in turn adjusts our moral framework – therefore the expectations act as a *lever* to adjust the framework.
- And, when we come to a deeper understanding of the world, the life, and of ourselves - as we grow and mature, our moral framework too, is transformed. These are then reflected, in changes to our moral expectations.

Furthermore, none of our moral frameworks, moral expectations stay static. We mature, and we grow in our thinking – an observation that will be further explored below.

Located in human brokenness

I have spoken about what *inspired*, and what *informed* this re-envisioning, now the discussion moves forward to discuss where this understanding is located. It is located in *human brokenness*, in the force field of sin.⁴

From a theological perspective, Brian Powers explains:

Moral injury emerges when an individual, in that place of sharp dilemma, [a person] comes to *realise* that the good they served with their whole orientation, their life, will, desire, and drive, is in fact, not the true good. Therefore, having identified themselves so completely with the “good” that they pursued, when that good is no longer understood as truly good, individuals come to experience moral trauma, and the crisis of their self-identity.⁵

There are four interlocking and interactive forces at work within, and surrounding, moral injury experiences in this forcefield of sin.

1. Powers speaks of the effect of the original sin (or the originating sin), in terms of the malleability of human perceptions of true good. Having lost focus on God, the true good, humans come to think of penultimate good, as if they are true good. If the first casualty of war is the truth, the first casualty of human brokenness is the “true good”.

⁴ The expression “human brokenness” is used in this paper as a theological term. However, I offer that it is possible to observe and recognise this *brokenness*, both in individuals and in the collective humanity, outside theological discourse.

⁵ Brian S. Powers, *Full Darkness: Original Sin, Moral Injury, and Wartime Violence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2019). 157.

2. And, when penultimate good is pursued as if it is the true good. Therefore, money is good, and sex is good, but if either is pursued as if it is the only, and the ultimate good, human wills and desires become seriously distorted.
3. Moreover, humans are wired to pursue what is believed to be good. Yet, in moral injury, it is this very energy and commitment that amplifies the damage, when the person realizes that what was believed to be truly good, that which was pursued with all their might was *not* the true good – an implosion is experienced.
4. Finally, in this forcefield of sin, those penultimate good-s also come to *compete* among themselves, and the idea of unified good is fractured. Therefore, the individual's own personal good, and their tribe's, their nation's good compete with what is good for others. To use an archaic terminology, our 'commonweal' becomes lost.

Thus, in our human brokenness, all moral frameworks are found to be 'penultimate'. In speaking of our own moral framework, values and beliefs, we must proceed with humility and caution.

Envisioning recovery

Having described the re-envisioned understanding of moral injury, the paper now turns to discuss how recovery is envisioned according to this perspective.

Three specific terms are typically used to describe experiences of moral disruptions, and they are often perceived as a continuum of increasing severity – from moral frustration to moral distress, then to moral injury. Litz and Kerig, for example, argue that the Potentially Morally Injurious Events (PMIEs) are the moral frustrations and distress, and when they become sufficiently debilitating, the *potential* becomes the *actual* moral injury.⁶

This re-envisioned understanding suggests that while moral frustrations might progress into moral distress, at the distressing end of moral distress, there is no continuum. An implosion takes place. Thus, moral frustrations and distress reflect the shattering of moral expectations while moral injury is the silent implosion of the person's moral framework and

⁶ Brett T. Litz and Patricia K. Kerig, "Introduction to the Special Issue on Moral Injury: Conceptual Challenges, Methodological Issues, and Clinical Applications," *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 32, no. 3 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.22405>. 344-345.

its aftermath. As it was noted in Jonah, the shattering is a visible/audible event in real time; but the injury is often only known and recognised in the aftermath – in the sounds of silence.

The crucial point is that this chasm means that strategies for addressing moral injury, the imploded moral frameworks, are likely to be very different from ways in which shattered moral expectations in PMIEs might be approached. These will now be outlined.

Addressing shattered moral expectations - PMIEs

The discussion begins with how shattered and/or shattering moral expectations might be addressed. And in doing so, I note that these relate both to the strategies towards prevention, and towards assisting those who grapple with the shattered moral expectations, with PMIEs, that have not yet turned into an implosion, the actual moral injury.

In prevention then, the re-envisioned understanding of moral injury suggests “moral expectation management”, as a primary strategy. This will enable the persons to set realistic moral expectations through effective pre-emptive psychosocial education, tailored to individuals, their role, and tasks, specific to the environment they are about to enter. Such psychosocial education will adjust the person’s moral expectations and enrich their moral framework.

In addressing moral frustrations, and distress (the PMIEs), the understanding suggests the importance of identifying the specific moral expectations that are shattered or shattering in the context, and the aspects of their moral framework these now make visible. In doing so, it is helpful to consider both *the person*, and *the setting* where the distress is experienced.

Here, the readjustment of the person’s moral expectations is a readily accessible strategy. Sadly, addressing their setting, the systemic issues, are typically less accessible and desired changes may be harder to leverage.

In considering possible readjustments to moral expectations, it is helpful to circumnavigate abstract either/or discussions on “*what’s right*” and what may be “wrong”. – These typically and very quickly culminate in a dead end of moral high-ground – “*I am right, and you are morally wrong!*” Instead, consider “what we might *rightly expect* in the given context.” This is a more workable starting point for readjustments.

There is one final point to be made in addressing shattered moral expectations. I suggested earlier that as we grow and mature as human persons, our moral frameworks and expectations naturally evolve. And I suggest that PMIEs, moral frustrations, and distress, can

be a part of that journey. I liken this to the Japanese art of 金継ぎ (Kin-tsu-gi) - golden joinery. It is a technique where broken pieces of pottery are rejoined using lacquer mixed with gold powder. Breakage and repair are seen as an essential part of the history of an object, just as such re-adjustments to moral expectations and frameworks, might be seen as a part of personal growth in attaining greater maturity.

Not that the bowl was made to be broken, but breakages and repairs add to the beauty of the piece, rather than destroying it. The same applies to human persons, our scars are beautiful.

Imploded moral frame work and moral repair

So, what do we do with moral injury itself, the implosion? What do we do, when the person's morality framework and their world view lie in pieces on the ground, in that dark and isolating place where nothing makes sense anymore?

Humpty Dumpty illustration is helpful here - not that the injured are humpty dumpties!⁷ The point is that the imploded moral framework cannot be put back together, and a new one must take its place.

Why? The illustration of Saul of Tarsus who became Paul, the Apostle might be helpful. He was a zealous Pharisee, seeking righteousness through the Law. Yet, on that Damascus Road, he realises that he was fighting against the very Lord he thought he was serving. In that moment, his *theology of righteousness* through the Law imploded. He realises that he was not the Lord's righteous servant, but the vilest of the rebels against the Lord.

Saul, who is now Paul, then spends next ten years reading and re-reading the Law, the Prophets and the Writings in his new meaning making. And in doing this, he recognises that he is surrounded by the Forcefield of Grace! His absolute amazement was that God should appear to the likes of him - (1 Cor 15.8), who persecuted Jesus. He therefore came to speak of *new theology of righteousness* - as a free gift of God's grace.

Furthermore, Paul serves to illustrate another point, that the journey of moral repair is far from linear, or peaceful. He kept on getting bashed up, his life was threatened many times, and he was likely executed and died a martyr's death. Yet, Paul found his new life, though his

⁷ "Humpty Dumpty sat on the wall, Humpty Dumpty had a great fall, All the King's horses and all the King's men, Couldn't put Humpty together again" From <https://publicdocumentcentre.education.tas.gov.au/library/Shared%20Documents/Humpty-Dumpty-lyrics-small-handout.pdf>

new meaning making – he could say, “If God is for us, who is against us?” (Rom 8.31.) He found his freedom.

So, moral repair is not a destination – but it is a journey, a long and a tough one.

To finish, there are three observations to be made about this journey:

First, typically, the journey of new meaning making is assisted by time, safe space, and family/friends/colleagues who surround the injured, who might walk with them as companions and witnesses - not to drag them along, not to push them from behind, nor to push the injured into the path they stipulate. Best counselling practices are built around those elements.

Secondly, moral injury can be weaponised, as it has been shown so clearly by the work done by Assala Khettache.⁸ The dark lonely space of implosion is a very vulnerable place, bad actors can manipulate and do damage.

Thirdly, religious faith can be lost in moral injury experiences. If a faith was a part of the person’s former moral framework or world view, when that framework implodes, that faith too, likely implodes, and this was very much the case with Jonah. What might be the appropriate ways of providing faith based chaplaincy or pastoral care in those situations? I know of some chaplains who would try manipulating the injured back into the faith. I am not comfortable with that, but I am comfortable with Ananias who comes to Paul who was blind and fasting, to be the human presence of God’s grace.

Postscript

There are so much more to be said, but I end with a sense of hope, and it comes from my sense of God who enfolds us with that quiet, unassuming and all permeating grace. Moral repair is possible, by the grace of God, and through the supportive community that embodies that grace. It will take time, it will be a difficult road – but at the end of that road, the new person will say, “I would not have wanted my life to have been any different.” But we need to support them, and keep them alive, through this journey.

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⁸ Assala Khettache, "Robbins Lecture 2024: The weaponisation of collective moral injuries in Africa," (International Centre for Moral Injury, Durham University, 2024).
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