

Distribution Agreement

In presenting this thesis or dissertation as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for an advanced degree from Emory University, I hereby grant to Emory University and its agents the non-exclusive license to archive, make accessible, and display my thesis or dissertation in whole or in part in all forms of media, now or hereafter known, including display on the world wide web. I understand that I may select some access restrictions as part of the online submission of this thesis or dissertation. I retain all ownership rights to the copyright of the thesis or dissertation. I also retain the right to use in future works (such as articles or books) all or part of this thesis or dissertation.

Signature:

Brian S. Powers

Date

The End of Violent Myth:
A Reflection on Veteran Trauma, Original Sin, and Wartime Violence

By

Brian S. Powers
Th.M, Columbia Theological Seminary

Graduate Division of Religion
Theological Studies

Ian A. McFarland
Advisor

Wendy Farley
Committee Member

Ellen Ott Marshall
Committee Member

Accepted:

Lisa A. Tedesco, Ph.D.
Dean of the James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies

Date

*The End of Violent Myth:
A Reflection on Veteran Trauma, Original Sin and Wartime Violence*

By

Brian S. Powers
Th.M, Columbia Theological Seminary, 2011

Advisor: Ian A. McFarland, Ph.D

An abstract of
A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in Religion
2016

Abstract

The End of Violent Myth: A Reflection on Veteran Trauma, Original Sin and Wartime Violence

By Brian S. Powers

An Augustinian understanding of original sin holds explanatory power to describe the way violence effects participants and civilians during times of war. In light of this, this dissertation argues broadly for the power of sin as a theological and experientially descriptive concept to describe the “wrongness” at the heart of the human experience of violence in war. Building on an Augustinian understanding of the power of external forces to sequester and bind human willing in particular patterns in pursuit of false and illusory goods, this dissertation argues that combatant willing is sequestered and conditioned in particularly traumatic ways. Through the lens of modern interpreters of Augustine, primarily Alistair McFadyen, the concepts of bound will and original sin can be seen to illuminate the disconnect in the ways wartime violence is conceived by American society and by those who participate in it on that society’s behalf. The conceptual vocabulary of original sin and bound willing help elucidate the falseness and fragility of the cultural understanding of American military violence as an uncritical “good” that is performed in the name of superior moral virtues. The falseness of this uncritical good reveals the need for a complex understanding of morality in light of the power of obedience, conditioning, habituation and other forces to narrow the horizon of options open to combatants and the ways in which these forces impact the psyche of combatants. The experience of combat is an acute encounter with human vulnerability and mortality and can be deeply traumatic, affecting the combatant’s ability to experience hope and joy. This condition resonates with Augustine’s conception of postlapsarian life as disconnected from the one true good of God and in the power of fear and terror. The constriction of agency experienced by combatants is extreme and often results in profound damage to their self-image and constructed identity. This damage resonates with theological interpretations of the effects of sin as hopelessness and poisoned memory. The conception of original sin, however, also frames guilt in non-exhaustive terms that provide avenues toward healing by reframing notions of blame and moral injury in non-totalizing axiological contexts.

**The End of Violent Myth:
A Reflection on Veteran Trauma, Original Sin and Wartime Violence**

By

Brian S. Powers
Th.M, Columbia Theological Seminary, 2011

Advisor: Ian A. McFarland, Ph.D

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in Religion
2016

Acknowledgements

With the exception of God's good creation, nothing springs from the mind of its author independent of the care and influence of those around them. As such, there are many people whom I would like to acknowledge with gratitude at the outset. First and foremost, I want to thank my loving and courageous wife Jennifer for her tireless support, love, encouragement and perhaps most of all, grace. The footprints of not only my life, but our journey together can be traced through these pages and I'm forever grateful that I'm able to walk it with such a giving and caring partner and mother. I'm also grateful to my children Dylan, Lucas and Caroline for your patience, your enlivening silliness and your seemingly infinite capacity to love me at my worst. I am grateful to my mother, Barbara Powers, whose wonderful commitment to regularly care for our kids, even at their worst, allowed me the time and mental freedom to complete this project.

This project took place with the intellectual and very often pragmatic and life-giving advice of wonderful mentors and faculty members. I am grateful to Ian McFarland for his mentorship, guidance, support, encouragement and (often disturbingly) timely feedback on my work; to Wendy Farley for her guidance and warm encouragement in navigating the rigors of the program, particularly while raising small children; to Ellen Marshall for inspiring me to enter the doctoral program and for her graceful mentorship and friendship through various projects and teaching endeavors. I'm thankful to Joy McDougall, whose seminar kindled the idea around which this project developed, for her confidence in my abilities and help in developing my own teaching style. I'm thankful for the opportunity to have worked with Thee Smith, Liz Bounds, Luke Timothy Johnson, Pam Hall, Edward Queen, and Vincent Cornell and am grateful to have had the opportunity to develop my ideas under the influence of such brilliant scholars.

I am also deeply indebted to my brilliant peers here at Emory University. I am grateful for the many lunch-time conversations in the magical place more commonly known as the graduate student lounge in Callaway Hall. Those conversations both launched my critical thinking and provided great relief from daily stresses. As such, I'm notably thankful for the friendship of Devin White, whose collegial yet critical advice saved me from academic paralysis more than once and inspired more than a few new ways of looking at things. I'm thankful for many ongoing conversations with Corbin Boekhaus, Adam Mathes, Chris Holmes, Jonathan Potter, David Carr, Kyle Tau, Tony Alonso, Jay Thomas, Meredith Doster, Ryan Kuratko, Winston Persaud, Michael Yandell, Becky Copeland, Ashley Graham, Layla Karst, Matthew Pierce, and so many others. Thank you for your friendship and inspiration, both inside the academic environment and without. I'm deeply appreciative for the conversation with my peers in the Religion, Conflict and Peacebuilding concentration – Joe Winnika-Lydon, Sarah MacDonald, Liz Whiting Pierce, Sarah Muwahidah, Georgette Ledgister, Adam Strater, and Sara Williams. It was a privilege to be around such brilliant, kind and compassionate colleagues.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....1

Chapter 1 - The Vocabulary of Sinfulness – Original Sin and the Trauma of Violence.....16

Chapter 2 – Fields of Force and the Contemporary Military Experience.....50

Chapter 3 – The Dichotomous Experience of Violence: Veterans and American Society.....72

Chapter 4– The Privation of Life and the Distorted Soul.....116

Chapter 5 – Perpetrators and Victims – The Enslavement of Agency and Betrayal of Identity.....144

Chapter 6 – Sin as Poisoned Memory and Hopeless Future.....182

Bibliography.....227

Introduction

“I was sometime his slave, and had an opportunity of learning well his character and disposition, and it is but simple justice to him when I say, in my opinion, there never was a more kind, noble, candid, Christian man than William Ford. The influences and associations that had always surrounded him, blinded him to the inherent wrong at the bottom of the system of Slavery. He never doubted the moral right of one man holding another in subjection. Looking through the same medium with his fathers before him, he saw things in the same light. Brought up under other circumstances and other influences, his notions would undoubtedly have been different.”

- Solomon Northup, describing his first “master” in *Twelve Years a Slave*¹

Violence, argues Rene Girard, is a primary and preeminent force that dominates human nature, ritual, activity and destiny.² Our societies are only able to keep violence at bay because we have developed complex mechanisms to control it. In the grand scope of human development, the primary function of religion, according to Girard, is to lend its profound symbol structure and mythos to these controlling mechanisms – creating and naming the critical distinction between “holy, legal, legitimate violence” which is done reluctantly in order to stave off outbreaks of “unjust, illegal and illegitimate violence.”³ Yet these delineations marking off good and bad violence are ultimately illusory, he argues further, for violence, like a wild conflagration, will feed “on the very objects intended to smother its flames.”⁴ The problem is that the mechanisms designed to control violence, particularly as they are infused with religions symbol, ironically enshrine it in

¹ Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave* (New York: Sterling Publishing Company, 2013), 53.

² Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: John’s Hopkins University Press, 1977), 31.

³ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 31. Girard argues quite simply and compellingly that when violent sacrifice is performed as a means to ward off outbreaks of uncontrollable violence, when it is done in order to “deceive” the violent impulse of vengeance into satisfaction, the only real victor is violence itself.

human eyes as a sacred force, a powerful and primal thing that is external to humanity – something that continually threatens us from without. The mechanisms and religiously sanctioned forms of violence blind us to the violence that is within us, the distortions and violent tendencies that are passed through otherwise exemplary people like William Ford, from generation to generation.

In the American cultural discourse about violence, it is perhaps accurate to state that in the wake of the terrorist attacks that claimed nearly 3,000 lives in New York and Washington D.C. on September 11, 2001, both everything changed and nothing changed. The violence we experienced was, at least for this generation, new. For the first time since the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, violence caused by an outside entity occurred on American soil, and for the first time in nearly two centuries, it occurred on the American mainland. Our vulnerability to this kind of violence became apparent to most, and in the conversations and debates that followed, it was widely recognized that technological advances in transportation, infrastructure and weaponry had come with new and unique dangers. The fear of attack based on these new vulnerabilities tilted the sacrosanct and delicate cultural balance between freedom and security heavily in the direction of increased security. We reluctantly, and sometimes not so reluctantly, embraced greater forms of violence, “enhanced interrogation techniques” and new legal definitions of combatants that allowed us greater freedom to act violently in response to the violence that threatened us. We embraced once more what John Tirman calls the “frontier myth,” – a deeply embedded cultural narrative of national strength and American exceptionalism that tacitly underwrites military ventures as culturally and

religiously necessary in furthering the great American enterprise.⁵ While salient discussion about the nature of conflict, the risks of violence and the moral difficulties of torture have slowly emerged in the public consciousness, there remains a powerful religious and ideological undercurrent in our cultural imagination that uncritically accepts American military violence as categorically “good” in support of the American enterprise and exhibits an astounding blindness to its destructive effects.⁶

In stark contrast to the frontier myth and its uncritical acceptance of US military action is what U.S. Army psychologist David Grossman calls the “bitter harvest” of our participation in violence – the psychological trauma of our military members.⁷ The conflict in Afghanistan has become the longest conflict in American history. The war in Iraq stands as the third longest, with only the Vietnam War between the two. These lengthy, “low intensity” wars together have produced a generation of increasingly traumatized veterans. Recent studies show that as many as 20% of veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan have Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or suffer from significant depression. At the time of this writing, 22 American military veterans commit suicide each day. Whatever its root, there is something pathological about the violence of conflict that cannot be easily integrated into either the psyche of the veteran or the narrative of uncritical American exceptionalism. The trauma, the psychic inability to make sense of the experience that these veterans hold within themselves, shatters notions

⁵ John Tirman, *The Deaths of Others: The Fate of Civilians in America's Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 13.

⁶ Primarily here, I am referring to the countless civilian deaths that Tirman chronicles in *The Deaths of Others*. However, as recent history has shown, the second and third order effects of military actions are rarely predictable. Whereas the invasion of Iraq was bound to be initially destabilizing, it would be difficult if not impossible to predict that the instability would eventually give rise to the horrifically violent and genocidal Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

⁷ David Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, (New York: Back Bay Books, 1995), 89.

of sanitized and uncritically “good” conflict in which death is always administered only to those who “deserve” it and “collateral damage” is reduced to zero through technology and “smart bombs.” Veterans often experience first-hand a force of violence that as Girard argues, continually threatens to “overflow its confines and flood the surrounding area,”⁸ invading and infecting those who contact it. Their trauma provides a window into the true heart of violence and its capacity to annihilate our ability to make meaning of our lives and to hope in the future. It refuses to permit the powerful forces of American exceptionalism and the frontier myth and cultural and ideological hegemony to pass unchallenged.

The deep disparity between the view that American military violence serves an uncritical “good” and the often-traumatizing experience of those charged with applying it reveals several significant concerns that resonate deeply with Girard’s theory of violence, and which underlie this study. First, the disconnect between the “on the ground” reality of conflict and the public’s understanding of it inhibits authentic reflection on our cultural, national, and religious values concerning violence and its merits and detriments. Tirman powerfully argues that the American cultural narrative provides a *de facto* justification for extreme “total war” strategies and anesthetizes the public to the real suffering of those involved. If we remain blind to our own capacity for destructive violence, how can we honestly discuss curtailing it or allowing the memory of it to influence our future decisions regarding the application of our inordinate military might? Second, the uncritical valorization of U.S. military ventures and military veterans inhibits a primary avenue of recovery for veterans by significantly isolating them. Trauma theorists from Sigmund Freud to Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub have argued that one

⁸ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 10.

of the key aspects of trauma recovery involves the speaking and hearing of the testimony of the traumatized. Those veterans that experience significant moral ambiguity about their participation in conflict have difficulty exploring this ambiguity and witnessing about their experiences to a society that simply wants to lavish praise upon their efforts and has seemingly little room for genuine reflection about American violence. Finally (and most critically for this study), the denial of the reality of the distorting power of violence in the world - and our own complicity in it - negates the redemptive power of the gospel by denying the severity of the condition from which Christ must redeem the world. It negates the power of the gospel to help the veteran, to envision that the world of violence is the world Christ entered, the world Christ took into himself upon the cross, and the world that the risen Christ promises to redeem – to ignore or deny this is to render both cross and empty tomb incomprehensible.

Given these concerns, I intend to argue in this work that the experience of trauma in veterans provides a crucial perspective on the nature of violence, and that Christian theological anthropology, most notably the conception of original sin, is powerfully descriptive of the pathology of violence and its effects on ourselves and the world, particularly as it refuses to locate sin and violence as either purely internal or external to human nature. I envision this project as the first of two interconnected parts. In this first part, then, I will explore the ways in which an Augustinian conception of original sin, particularly as envisioned by Alistair McFadyen in *Bound to Sin*, is salient to depict the power of violence in modern conflict and describe how its destructive tendrils reach into many aspects of the combatants' lives. I will argue that the bound and compelled willing of the participant in conflict produces a unique stress that is bound up with an awareness

of this bondage and the seeming hopelessness of escaping it. This stress and its suffocation of the soul can be viewed theologically as the suppression and distortion of the spirit of life: violence wounds one's ability to live in harmony with God, oneself and others. It deeply affects one's ability to value life in creation and express one's own life in loving community. I will argue further that this sequestered willing and suppressed spirit coalesce to produce two distinctive lasting wounds that are borne by many veterans: first, a memory laden with guilt, grief, horror and sorrow that robs the present of positive meaning and, second, a loss of hope - the inability to imagine an unburdened and free future. In the coda of this work, I will allude to the theme of the second part of this study (which will not be a part of this dissertation) – that resurrection and eschatology speak to the healing of memory and have the power to transform the present and infuse even the violent nature of the world with hope.

This work is primarily an exercise in public theology. In essence, I am arguing that the doctrine of original sin illuminates violence and human brokenness in a way that pierces through the dominant ideology in America regarding violence. Veteran trauma “unmasks” the character of violence in a way that reveals deep insights about the fragile and imperiled human condition. In Chapter 1, then, I will examine the doctrine of original sin as posited by Augustine and interpreted by Alistair McFadyen, highlighting its emphasis on the operation of the human will in the midst of powerfully distorting forces. In Chapter 2, I will describe how the concepts articulated by Augustine and McFadyen illuminate the forces affecting military combatants. In chapter 3 I will turn to the dichotomous views of violence present in American cultural discourse: the de facto cultural view of American exceptionalism and the traumatizing experience of veterans.

Following this, in chapters 4 and 5 I will use the insights Augustine and McFadyen have provided regarding human willing to analyze how the forces of modern combat damage the psyche of the veteran. In chapter 6 I will make a synthetic argument for the power of theological language to describe violence and trauma, arguing that the theological category of guilt, particularly as described through the universality of sin, provides a uniquely descriptive conception of the pathological situation of human violence that begins to open avenues towards the possibility of healing and redemption.⁹

Qualification – Excising The Myth of Punishment

In setting forth an Augustinian model of original sin as descriptive of the human situation, it is necessary to make a few preliminary remarks and qualifications. First and foremost, it should be noted that I do not intend to pursue a discussion of Augustine's theodicy and the theodical elements of his understanding of the fall outside of these introductory remarks. In order for Augustine to simultaneously preserve the primordial goodness of creation and deny that the sin and evil that so characterize our world were inherent to it (and thus created by God), he argues that original sin, as the congenital and inherited resistance to God's will is the just punishment inflicted upon humanity for the willful disobedience of Adam. Suffering and sin thus are given their theodical meaning – humanity incurs condemnation before God because of this now-inborn resistance. Humanity's suffering is thus deserved and no one can rightly claim that they suffer unjustly as a result. As McFarland notes, many traditions that find great theological value in Augustine's conception of original sin nonetheless attempt to modify the

⁹ I am examining, of course, one facet of human violence – armed conflict – and certainly do not mean to imply that this analysis exhausts the larger category. Merely that it suggests something about human violence, and that the theological claims that are applicable may be broader than the analysis itself.

doctrine in order to ameliorate or negate this notion that original sin is both cause of and explanation for human suffering.¹⁰

In keeping with many contemporary interpreters of Augustine, I find his continued use of the doctrine of the fall for theodicy – as an explanation of suffering through the “myth of punishment” deeply problematic. The notion that the extremely violent horrors the world has suffered throughout millennia of conflict – death, brokenness, killing, rape, torture – are deserved punishment for the sins of Adam fails to impress meaning upon these events to one who has witnessed and experienced them firsthand. The horror of a wedding celebration grotesquely transformed into death and misery by a predator drone, of a 10-year old boy stepping on a land mine, of girls disfigured with acid and beheaded because they desired to go to school as well as the debilitating life-long trauma endured by so many touched by the violence of conflict – all resist the notion of theodicy in the full force of their unyielding reality. As Wendy Farley argues, “Human history has been so badly stained by suffering that it cannot be endured. It has become literally meaningless.”¹¹ Consequently, attempts to domesticate this meaningless suffering into an ideology or simple theodical worldview are “mocked by the destruction all around us.”¹² I will argue that the very meaninglessness at the heart of suffering is what, in many ways, must command our attention as it should pierce through ideology and theory and give us an accurate barometer of the brokenness in which we find ourselves.

¹⁰ Ian A. McFarland, *In Adam's Fall: A Meditation on the Christian Doctrine of Original Sin*, (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell Press, 2010), 46.

¹¹ Wendy Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion: A Contemporary Theodicy*, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 11.

¹² *Ibid.*

While the theodical dimensions in Augustine's conception of original sin are problematic, his understandings of psychology and willing are profoundly descriptive of the human condition, particularly in regard to the force of violence. Like Alistair McFadyen, I will argue that the doctrine holds great explanatory power in describing human pathologies of violence and dehumanization. Specifically, what I will argue and attempt to illustrate is that sin, as a congenital and unavoidable force, given particularity here as violence, is so powerful, infectious, distorting and ubiquitous that apart from God's active grace, humanity has no hope of redemption. Lost in violence, we are continually destroying ourselves, as Athanasius argued, "returning, through corruption, to non-existence again."¹³ I will maintain, in other words, that there is a profound soteriological value in Augustine's conception of original sin: it demonstrates how profoundly broken humanity is and how helpless humanity is to save itself from the forces of sin and violence present both within and without our constructions of self.

Guilt, Innocence and Blame

The key in separating the problematic *theodicy* of punishment from the powerfully descriptive *psychology* of original sin lies in the implication of universal guilt. For Augustine, original sin was not simply a corollary of the confession of Christ's status as universal Savior, but also the punishment for the sins of Adam. As such, for him there is a direct link between the universal guilt that humanity incurs through congenital sinfulness and blameworthiness. In other words, if we affirm that original sin tells us about the justified consequence of human rebellion against God, then we may affirm that

¹³ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, trans. and ed. a religious of C.S.M.V. (Crestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir's Press, 1996), 30.

because we are guilty we deserve punishment. On the other hand, the affirmation of hopelessness in sin apart from divine grace need not necessarily suggest such a connection. It can suggest a less juridical paradigm – a more basic linkage between universal guilt and alienation from God. If we affirm that original sin is the cause and explanation of human sinfulness - but not of humanity’s experience of evil - then we may affirm that because we are guilty, we are alienated from the true source of life and are perishing without concluding that human pain and suffering are deserved and divinely sanctioned punishment. As will become clear as the study progresses, I will affirm the connection between *universal guilt and alienation while challenging the connection between universal guilt and condemnation*, particularly at an individual level.

In the context of American society, we have been conditioned to understand guilt in a particularly penal sense, making it more difficult to understand how one may affirm guilt without correspondingly attributing blame. In our legal system, if one is not innocent, one is guilty, and if one is guilty, one is worthy of blame and moral condemnation.¹⁴ In this study, I will attempt to decouple these links on the grounds that the legal categories of “innocence” and “guilt” greatly distort our ability to adequately shape a moral vision that addresses the forces that shape our world and us. If individual, personal guilt is equated directly with individual and personal moral blameworthiness, then the ascription of guilt to oneself is something to be deeply feared and greatly avoided. As a result, in American society we have essentialized guilt and innocence into ontological categories to such an extent that we have become blind to our own

¹⁴ A point driven into our cultural consciousness by the seemingly innumerable police and legal procedurals that have graced television screens since the 1960s, in which courtroom dramas consistently end with the pronouncement of the verdict – either guilty, not guilty (often made synonymous with “innocent”), or not guilty by reason of mental illness or defect.

complicities in pathologies of violence as a means of avoiding the intolerable burden of guilt-as-blameworthiness. In the context of military violence, our essentially “good” and “innocent” troops are valorized and our “guilty” (and therefore blameworthy) enemies demonized. We view our own soldiers with a particular kind of innocence as they use “legitimate and necessary” violence to keep “bad” violence away from the rest of the nation. As Tirman highlights, we are particularly apathetic about the consequences of our violence and have little empathy for those affected by it, for if their suffering were to truly affect us, it would upset our essentialized moral categories. Grossman argues that as a society, we seem “unable to deal with moral pain or guilt,” arguing that our inclination is to treat the moral ambiguity evinced through trauma as “a neurosis or a pathology.”¹⁵ Given the psychological damage that results from killing (guilt), our failure to attend to violence’s own moral consequences ourselves is understandable, yet the result of this essentialization and avoidance is the degradation of moral language and the eventual loss of any meaningful moral category by which to name wrong actions themselves. Put a different way, if a victim must be declared “innocent” for a killing to be a moral transgression - whereas there is little moral dilemma in killing one who is “guilty” - then have we not lost the moral language to describe the *act* of killing itself as inherently immoral and thus always needing forgiveness?

In other words, in the essentialization of our moral categories, I am concerned that like Oscar Wilde’s Dorian Gray, we have managed to separate our collective actions from their attendant moral consequences. Dorian was so enamored with his own youth, beauty and vitality that he transferred his soul into an image of himself that bore the

¹⁵ Grossman, *On Killing*, 96.

consequences of his natural aging along with his morally disfiguring hedonistic lifestyle in order that his physical body would not age nor bear traces of his “sins.” Like Dorian, out of our love for our own perceived primordial innocence, moral goodness, and sacred mission to civilize the frontier, we have relegated the consequences of our collective violence to our military veterans in order that we may gaze and marvel at our own immaculate reflection in the mirror.¹⁶ Treating the trauma of combat as a psychological disorder (PTSD), we ignore the moral component of the injury and what it suggests to us about our own violence as veterans suffer the guilt of this burden. Veterans are sequestered in a bizarre moral space: they frequently deal with deep moral pain yet society’s uncritical valorization of them makes it difficult for them to witness to this ambiguity as it imposes an even greater expectation of moral heroism. Traumatized veterans thus often sink deeper into isolation, cut off from the avenues of healing testimony by those that perhaps fear to hear, lest they be faced to force their own non-innocence.

In light of this situation, I will in chapters 3 and 4 challenge many of the presuppositions that underlie the conception of individual guilt as linked to blame – though in doing so, there are a few implications of universal guilt that I must unpack. The concept of universal, existential guilt itself certainly suggests that true innocence is a category to which we do not have access. It holds that our guilt is existentially primordial; that is, we possess a congenital resistance to God’s will and are therefore always already guilty before God, even prior to committing particular (sinful) acts. In theological terms, the resistance to understand universal guilt as directly meriting blame

¹⁶ This is not to exclude others who have suffered from culturally conditioned violence, who certainly bear this same burden and relegation, but to use a reference point salient to this particular study.

and punishment, then, has to be conditioned by our understanding of God's response to our guilt. If God is nothing but judgment and condemnation, then guilt unequivocally implies blame, desert and punishment, and justice is nothing but the meting out of this deserved sentence. If God is present in Christ, however, then there is the hope of mercy and of forgiveness, the chance that God will seek to redeem the guilty rather than judge them. In this case, justice does not necessarily equate guilt with condemnation but with a sense of deep and urgent need for healing.

In merely rational terms, if guilt and innocence in individuals are acute, absolute and essential and are associated with blame and punishment, then the notion that we are congenitally guilty (even as infants) would rightly be met with repugnance. Yet as I will argue in developing notions of human willing and compelled agency, in a society as deeply interconnected as ours, with virtually each member participating in both active and passive ways in the forces that shape it, then guilt must be understood in a more communal and diffuse way. Critically, this is not to say that there are not lesser and greater levels of accountability in violently pathological situations. Differing power dynamics create different levels of responsibility and culpability for actions. Yet if these levels are to be explored and the distorting and disfiguring forces that shape pathologies of violence are to be traced, then at the outset, the connection between individual guilt and blame must be suspended, else in our rush to judge one person guilty and another innocent, we miss the critical compulsions and forces that connect all of us.

Sin and Salvation

As with any exercise in public theology, a major component of my argument involves the recovery of theological language – here the rehabilitation of “sin-talk” in order to serve the purpose of illuminating and naming a societal ill. My contention is that our eyes have become blinded to our own capacity for and participation in great violence. Like McFarland, I share a concern that the term “sin” itself as used both by churches and society at large has become relegated to the description of “issues of marginal moral significance” such as “smoking, dancing, playing cards” and other guilty pleasures like eating too much chocolate or indulging in a second glass of wine.¹⁷ While even the cultural term retains some sense of sin as a mysterious force, if its primary usage is to name trifling indulgences, then the term itself holds little capacity to name that which is truly evil. It is my argument that a modified Augustinian conception of original sin allows the term again to describe the condition from which violence arises within us and the force that numbs us to our own participation in it. Stated in a more explicitly theological register, naming sin in these terms points to our situation of violence and apathy as one in which we are truly alienated from God as the source of life and love.

For Augustine the immense rhetorical and conceptual weight of describing the human condition in these terms did not lie simply in naming the hopelessness of humanity, but rather in the testimony to the power of divine grace. Girard also, despite his somewhat pessimistic view of violence as a force that “will not be denied,” understood that the crucifixion marked the end of sacrifice as a means of violence-avoidance, that the Gospels, in narrating the death of Christ from the perspective of the truly innocent victim refuse to allow us to view violence as a force that invades human

¹⁷ McFarland, *In Adam's Fall*, 5.

nature, culture and society from without. Similarly, it is my intention not simply to identify the power of human violence through the doctrine of original sin in order to cast the destructive state of humanity as ultimately tragic or hopeless, but as one of urgent and dire need. Therefore, in the second, projected part of this study, the resurrection will be retrieved as a hope among the seemingly hopeless – a way that guilt can be borne in the light of the one who does not judge but forgives, a way that memory can be borne and redeemed in the one who himself embodies the infinite in finite form, a way that human vulnerability is tolerable in light of the promised end. I therefore stand with Augustine in arguing that the power and beauty of true hope can only be glimpsed in recognition of the full darkness of human sin and violence.

Chapter 1 – The Vocabulary of Sinfulness – Original Sin and the Trauma of Violence

“Sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned”

- Romans 5:12 (NRSV)

Perhaps the primary task of Christian theology is to continually translate its doctrines, concepts, and symbol systems into the linguistic and conceptual *lingua franca* of the contemporary world. What is at stake in this enterprise is the relevance of theology to speak to the problems that present themselves in ways that are both consistent with world history and challenge society by their historical novelty. In light of the violent threats and conflicts that much of the world currently face, the doctrine of sin can hold a great deal of explanatory power. Yet it is in dire need of fresh translation, as in its current colloquial usage it appears to have lost much of its capacity to speak to the largest threats to life in the modern world. Its meaning has been colonized by a consumer culture and its primary usages seem to describe a trivial indulgence (the “sinfulness” of giving in to the “temptation” to eat a piece of chocolate cake) or the transgression of a (often sexual) societal norm (the “sinfulness” of those whose sexual practice doesn’t conform to the standards of the community).¹⁸ These definitions have a neutering effect on the term and as such, it is rendered impotent to speak to the distorting forces that corrupt our desires and to speak to sin’s most destructive and violent outcomes.

The deeply problematic aspect of this for Christian theology is that the notion of sin is deeply intertwined with and informed by the most powerful doctrines and symbols

¹⁸ This is not to suggest that these examples exhaust the totality of the cultural meaning of sin – merely to demonstrate that it is often sequestered in these ways.

of Christianity: atonement and salvation - cross and resurrection.¹⁹ Our understanding of sin thus shapes how we view the event of the cross and salvation itself. If sin is understood in a relatively trifling sense, then the potent images of crucifixion and empty tomb also become pale and colorless. Is our eating of chocolate or our failure to adhere to societal norms what we need the death of Jesus of Nazareth on the cross to save us from? Conversely, and even more to the point, are these indulgences and failures to conform the problems of the world that are revealed in the torturous violence of the cross? If sin is perceived as merely a trifling indulgence, then in a world of hunger, conflict, terrorism, torture, dehumanization, rape, oppression and subjugation, certainly the message of the gospel seems absurd – and the brutal death of Jesus even more puzzling. Much of the power of the gospel rests upon its insight about the force at the heart of the description of the world as it is – does the notion of “sin” truly have the power to name what is wrong, what is functionally broken and awry? The gospel poses an answer to this question at the cross – the damage and danger of sin is laid bare in, among other things, our brutal capacity for violence against the innocent. Sin, then, must be redeemed from its stultifying cultural accretions in order to both faithfully convey the horror of the crucifixion’s testimony to sin’s reality and to adequately describe the wrongness of the world in a compelling way.

The deep irony of sin’s current inability as a term to describe the wrongness of the world is that our society seems open to new descriptions of this wrongness, as multiple

¹⁹ It is not my intention to “take a side” in terms of which way this epistemology properly progresses – whether sin is revealed as such primarily at the cross (Barth) or whether a full and true understanding of sin can be felt and understood prior to the revelation of Christ (e.g. Jonathan Edwards). My intention here is to note the profound connection between salvation, atonement and sin in an effort to draw attention to the term sin as it is scripturally informed by the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, theologically informed by the crucifixion and revelation of Christ, Jesus’ resurrection and the offer of forgiveness to the perpetrators.

threats to the stability of the world challenge governments and philosophical constructions to account for danger, violence, and radical evil. While it likely didn't take two airliners careening into the World Trade Center towers to convince anyone that the world isn't as it should be, it is safe to say that after 9/11, Americans have a heightened awareness of the "wrongness" of the world. Indeed, in a larger sense, after the violence of the 20th century shattered the progressive optimism that opened it, this sense of "wrongness" has developed a particular resonance in the West. The continued virulence and increasing militancy of religious radicalism around the world has resulted in alarming displays of dehumanization and misery; the specter and threat of new and continued viral outbreak brings out the worst of our own fears and demonstrates our own fragility; hunger, poverty and economic disparity continually plague our world. Most critically, governments around the world seem powerless to "right" the proverbial ship – opting instead for solutions that seem to exacerbate the problem, which often simply re-enforces the notion that things are not as they should be. In Girard's terms, it would appear that the very institutions we have established to control and curtail violence have often fanned its flames instead. Perhaps a deeper and more "mythic" conception of violence and wrongness may help us understand both the world and ourselves powerfully and authentically.

A central aim of this project is to demonstrate that the concept of sin possesses the gravitas and force to describe the wrongness of the world in a compelling way – to argue, building on Alistair McFadyen's work in *Bound to Sin*, that the doctrine of sin itself holds descriptive and explanatory power in naming a pathological force in our world that lies behind its violence and wrongness. I will argue here that the specific concept of original

sin provides a conceptual vocabulary that holds together the power of violence and respects its almost mythic nature and provides a moral framework that resonates with the forces encountered on the modern battlefield. I will argue in later chapters that as a means of public theology, sin can be understood to describe violence and its metastasizing effects in a profound way that directly challenges ideologies that conceive of violence as domesticable and controllable. I will argue further that because of the explanatory power of this understanding of sin as glimpsed through violence, it can be used to illuminate the psychological wounds suffered by those who have experienced trauma as a result of participation in conflict and ultimately shed light on the pervasive, infectious and insidious nature of violence itself. In light of these larger aims, in the first half of this chapter I will describe an essentially Augustinian conception of original sin, highlighting Augustine's understanding of the constraints of human willing and then discuss how this idea can be traced through specific pathologies, drawing a conceptual vocabulary from Alistair McFadyen's contemporary translation of Augustine's doctrine in *Bound to Sin*.

Sin, Originally

Prior to Augustine, the discussion of sin revolved around two confessional foci. The first was the conviction that the world is not as it should be – that things have somehow gone deeply wrong, and second, that humanity is implicated in this wrongness. In addition, early reflections on sin were further bounded by several theological claims that came to serve as “relative absolutes” in theological reflection, and theologians navigate these in differing ways. The first of these bounding claims is that the world,

including humanity and nature, was “good” as created by God. As Irenaeus demonstrates, this may not mean that the world, or humanity, was perfect, but it means that the world was not created in a defective state by God and thus protects God from the charge of explicitly authoring evil.²⁰ He distinguishes sharply between that which is created, good and rational and that which is uncreated and perfect. That which is created is good and can ascend “towards the perfect,” but this perfecting is a process of growth by which the good creation asymptotically approaches God.²¹

The second of these claims is that the world as it is now is burdened and broken in a state of sin - it is not how it was meant to be. Athanasius expressed this distortion as existential threat in terms of being and non-being, arguing that while the world was created from nothing and given the gift of life and being, sin, violence, and death have so powerfully twisted the world that it now risks returning to non-existence and utterly perishing. In terms of humanity, Gregory of Nyssa describes that our nature, comprised of both spirit and flesh, has developed a “bias towards evil.”²² Rather than adhere to our higher, spiritual, nature which exhibits the image of God, we are weighted down by our lower, fleshly nature and have become deeply corrupted by our baser desires and instincts. According to Gregory, the darkness of evil has interposed itself between the light of God and the world and eclipsed God’s goodness such that evil’s shadow hangs heavy upon the earth.²³

²⁰ Irenaeus, “Against Heresies,” in *Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol 1*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 4.37-39. Perfection for Irenaeus entails the full development of the spiritual capacity for God. Humanity in its infancy in the garden (and even now) was good, but unprepared for this, “unaccustomed to, and unexercised in, perfect discipline.”

²¹ Ibid.

²² Gregory of Nyssa, “On the Making of Man,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, vol 5*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 5.22.4.

²³ Ibid., 5.21.3. Gregory here employs an evocative astronomical metaphor here to describe human sinfulness that continues into an understanding of the resurrection. He argues that like the darkness

Third, whatever the state of distortion of the world, one of the basic tenets of humanity is the power of self-determination, more commonly understood as free will. Irenaeus understood that autonomy was simply a fundamental ground of moral existence, arguing that creatures could either be morally free and sometimes sinful or irrational and determined by an outside force towards good. He argues that if any being is created with an evil nature, it cannot be held morally accountable for its evil deeds, “for such were they created.”²⁴ Since all people are of the same (primordially) good nature, he argues, and since they all have the free will to either cling to this good or to reject it, the condemnation of those who do ill is just. What is critical is that all persons have the power to act as they will, either heeding the good counsel of prophets and wise and godly individuals, or abandoning such goodness and acting against it. Similarly, Gregory of Nyssa argues that absent free will, there is no morality, for “virtue must be a voluntary thing,” neither forced nor compelled.²⁵

These boundaries color early theologians’ discussions of the Fall – the primordial event by which the world has gone deeply wrong – in widely varying ways. For Irenaeus, for example, it was not possible for creatures to be rational and morally free but unable to commit sin. Humanity as created by God was to develop from its created state (which was good, but not perfect) into perfection through a long progression of maturity. The sin of Adam is a failure of obedience - the rejection of this divine plan of development and a reaching for “godliness” while still in a state of moral immaturity; it

imposed upon the earth by a celestial body that is positioned directly between it and the sun, evil is finite and has “necessary limits.” Eventually, in due time, the conical shadow passes over the earth, and the light again shines upon it. The resurrection and eschatological return to the good is a necessary matter of course, as the goodness of God is limitless and infinite and perseveres over the darkness.

²⁴ Irenaeus, “Against Heresies,” 4.37.2.

²⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, “On the Making of Man,” 16.11.

was a denial of God's ability to perfect humanity and grant flesh incorruptibility.²⁶

Irenaeus views the fall as a serious rupture in the divine plan, but also as an outworking of the infantile exercise of humanity's capacity to freely will. Origen, using a more classically Greek conceptual vocabulary, posits that the creation of intelligences (*noes*) precedes the creation of the material world and that these intelligences originally contemplated God in the full warmth of divine love. Each intelligence (save that of Christ) becomes "satiated" and, from the resulting sense of ennui, fell away from this original state of intimacy, cooling (*psychesthai*) into souls (*psychai*).²⁷ The degree to which each fell away from God is revealed by the materiality of their being.

Accordingly, angels fell the least, demons the most and humanity fell to a position somewhere between them. The goodness of God and the free will of the creature are preserved in the postlapsarian state: the will mediates the soul's continual position in the material world between spirit and flesh.

Augustine and the Binding of the Will

Augustine affirms the essential goodness of the prelapsarian creation, yet carves out a particularly nuanced understanding of free will that deeply colors his understanding of the Fall and the broken condition of the world. For Augustine, Adam and Eve (but primarily Adam) possessed the ability to freely will – to be human is to possess a created will and to act rationally in the world by exercising one's own volition. The issue in the garden concerns the proper exercise of the free will that is granted to Adam, who is unique among all non-angelic creatures as a personal agent. If, Augustine argues, Adam

²⁶ Irenaeus, "Against Heresies," 5.5.2.

²⁷ Origen, "De Principiis," in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol 4, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 1.3.8.

had kept the commandments of God “with pious obedience,” then he would have passed from his mortal form into something far greater, obtaining “without suffering death, a blessed immortality without end.”²⁸ However, along with the capacity to exercise the will “properly” in faithfulness comes the necessary capacity that Adam may use his “free will proudly and disobediently,” in which case he would be subject to death, and to live “as the beasts do,” as a “slave of his own lust, destined to suffer eternal punishment after death.”²⁹

The true fall, Augustine argues, takes place at the level of the will. He argues that the will follows desire – it inclines by its nature toward that which it perceives as good. In the garden, Adam is presented with a close connection with God, who as Augustine repeatedly states, “supremely is” – the ultimate and true good, “by which is bestowed upon [the will] the light by which it can see and the fire by which it can love.”³⁰ Consequently, the will’s ability to see truly and to love purely comes from its orientation towards God, and its obedience to the divine command. What precedes Adam’s physical *act* of disobedience is the true moment in which evil enters humanity; the turning of Adam’s perception of the ultimate good, and thus of his will, from God, the source of all true goodness, to himself. This turning itself is, for Augustine, the beginning of an evil will and the way in which that which was created good and rationally free becomes corrupted with evil and falls away from the One who is the very ground of being. It is not, Augustine is careful to note, that the will has turned towards something that is itself evil, but that it turns to itself and therefore, instead of desiring the ultimate good, which is

²⁸ Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, trans. and ed. R. W. Dyson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 12.22.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.13.

God, it desires that which is inferior – its own gratification. The disobedient act of eating the forbidden fruit is the act of a will that is following a corrupted desire to satiate itself rather than the naturally ordered higher desire to remain in communion with God.

For Augustine, since all of humanity and human society were united and held together in the person of Adam, the consequences of the turning of his will are catastrophic – not only for Adam and Eve, but for all subsequent generations. The most severe consequence, of course is the loss of the path from mortality to immortality. After failing to exercise his will with piety and obedience, Adam and subsequently all of humanity are subject to death – both the death of the physical body and the death of the soul through eternal condemnation. Yet the fall entails a particular distortion of human nature itself that binds humanity in separation from God congenitally. First, there is a disintegration of the connection between one’s volition – the will to do something – and one’s ability to carry out what one wishes to do. Augustine exhibits this primarily as a loss of control over one’s own body,³¹ the rebellion of which parallels Adam and Eve’s disobedience of God.³² Yet there is also the notion within this that there is a disconnection between willing (as agency) and desire itself. Even while the will follows desire, then, one of the consequences of original sin is the severing of the close connection between the two – most primally exhibited by Augustine as a loss of sexual control in which one often acts as one may not will to act. Second, and far more distorting, however, is the alienation of the will from that which is truly good. Having turned inward to the lesser goods, our desires are disordered and instead of being oriented

³¹ Notoriously, as McFarland notes in *In Adam’s Fall* p. 71 in *The Grace of Christ and Original Sin* 2.47, Augustine refers to this loss as a man’s inability to control his erection - but this same lack of sexual control is at least implied also in *City of God* 13.13, 13.14, 13.15 and 13.16.

³² Augustine, *City of God*, 13.14.

towards that which is the highest good, are oriented towards and driven by pursuit of lesser goods. Absent divine grace, we cannot re-orient our disordered and confused desires and our wills are bound in patterns of distorted willing. Augustine argues that since both in a mythical and a “seminal” sense, “we all were that one man who fell into sin,” these effects and distortions are propagated to all of humanity congenitally – the broken nature is propagated because “nothing could be born of them which was not what they themselves had been.”³³ We are all born into this sinful condition in which our wills are bound and our nature “vitiating” by sin – humanity’s “corrupt root” thus brings forth an entire situation of sin whose tendrils reach into all parts of human life.

The radicality of Augustine’s understanding of the fall revolves primarily around this notion that as a result of Adam’s sin, the will is hopelessly alienated from the true good absent divine grace. According to Augustine, the power of the evil unleashed is so great that it corrupts every facet of human nature, such that we can no longer choose to act rightly – our desires are too bent in pursuit of the lesser goods that we perceive to be ultimate. This presents a significantly darkened picture of human nature and human willing compared to earlier theologians’ understandings of “free will.” Augustine affirms the human capacity to will (volition), to act as personal agents, to choose between alternatives and to direct our own being, even in a postlapsarian state. What we cannot do, however, is to re-orient the desires and goods that drive our agential capacities in certain directions, as these desires drive and exert an almost totalizing “pull” upon our willing. Alienated from that which is supremely good, our willing is sequestered in

³³ Ibid., 13.3.

patterns that are ultimately pathogenic and infected with the corruption of sin.³⁴ We cannot, through the power of our own wills, escape these patterns and thus our capacity to act as agents, while remaining, is always bound: our horizons are limited by our situations and conditions and our choices are restricted within those horizons.

Augustine's significant departure from theologians such as Irenaeus, Origen and Gregory regarding postlapsarian will can be best understood in light of his lengthy controversy with Pelagius and his followers. Pelagius, a British ascetic, held that human willing was not damaged as a result of the fall – arguing that an essential part of our humanity, even in its postlapsarian state, is “to be free to choose between competing possibilities.”³⁵ For Pelagius, sin is propagated through imitation rather than congenital defect: born with the same capacity to freely will as Adam, we imitate his sin.³⁶ Personal autonomy is a critical component of human nature as created by God, Pelagius argues - the God-given capacity to do evil is just as important as the capacity to do good “because it makes the good part better by making it voluntary and independent, not bound by necessity but free to decide for itself.”³⁷ The will, as the controlling aspect of human decisions, remains fundamentally free - a “pure organ of free choice.”³⁸ It acts out of no internal compulsion or force but always maintains a neutral disposition. The will itself is the sole causal force of human agency – the only force that can operate upon

³⁴ This is not to say that all patterns of thought, willing, and behavior are equally harmful – only to say that none, absent divine grace, are truly good. There are greater and lesser degrees of harmful patterns, to which I will turn my attention in subsequent sections.

³⁵ Alistair McFadyen, *Bound to Sin: Abuse, Holocaust and the Christian Doctrine of Sin* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 168. It should be noted that while this is certainly how Augustine and his interpreters understood Pelagius, his precise understanding of willing remains somewhat obscure as little of his writings are extant, and almost none of the surviving documents are lengthy.

³⁶ This is the view Augustine vehemently argues against in *On the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins and the Baptism of Infants*, 1.9,1.10.

³⁷ Pelagius, “To Demetrias,” in *The Letters of Pelagius and His Followers*, ed. and trans. B. R. Rees (Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 1991), 3.2.

³⁸ McFadyen, *Bound to Sin*, 168.

one's action of "willing." It is unmoved by habit, action or other forces impacting the self, though Pelagius noted that the will could be "bent" in a certain direction, partially due to the long habit of doing ill.³⁹ It is in this way that Pelagius understands sin to occur and to be passed from generation to generation: humanity is used to patterns of behavior that it habitually imitates. Yet there is nothing that prevents us from willfully contravening those patterns, as Pelagius understood the will to be resistant to external factors as well. While he understood that external forces could influence willing to a degree, he held that because of the will's "transcendence of social and psychological conditioning factors," we always are capable of willing and acting independent of them.⁴⁰

Sin in the thought of Pelagius then must be narrowly defined as "only free acts of the will" in which we freely and individually choose sinful action; it is, in his words "the doing of a wrongful deed."⁴¹ Only the free choices we make when we could have chosen otherwise can be morally evaluated since the will possesses no inherent inclination (sinful or good) but rather remains neutral in its capacity to "orient oneself in action through free choice."⁴² The very heart of the argument with Augustine, of course, is the very capacity to orient oneself to the truly good. Pelagius argues that our most critical capacity as human beings is our ability to choose the good. According to Pelagius, we all possess the inherent capability of not sinning through the free, neutral and unmoved will. We are "inherently capable of willing and doing the good and so are culpable for all failure to do

³⁹ Pelagius, "To Demetrias," 3.2, 8.3.

⁴⁰ McFadyen, *Bound to Sin*, 170

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 171 and also Augustine, *On Nature and Grace*, 21. In *The Wounded Heart of God: The Asian Concept of Han and the Christian Doctrine of Sin* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), Andrew Sung Park uses a similar definition of sin, but does so in order to distinguish between sin as willful, deliberate action and "han," or the suffering and condition that sin often arises from.

⁴² McFadyen, *Bound to Sin*, 171.

so.”⁴³ Sin can therefore only be primarily spoken of in terms of individual sinful acts in which the good, which is always available to be chosen, is rejected.

Augustine contends that this view is deeply flawed because it ultimately grants power and responsibility to humanity for its own righteousness, losing sight of the Pauline understanding that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Despite his somewhat pessimistic view of human willing, what is at stake for Augustine in this argument is grace. In *On the Spirit and the Letter*, Augustine argues against the notion that we simply sin by habit or imitation, arguing implicitly that if this were so, then the law would have a salvific effect – it points to what is bad and wrong and we can become habituated to follow it. Yet, even if we become perfect servants of the law, he argues, our desire to break the law intensifies when something becomes forbidden, because in those circumstances the object desired becomes “all the more pleasant.”⁴⁴ The problem, he notes, is that the law may keep desires in check – it may constrain our sinful actions, but it cannot alter our desire to break the law, to covet. In terms of desire itself, the law does not inhibit it, but like a flowing stream, which “becomes more violent when it meets with any impediment, and when it has overcome the stoppage, falls in a greater bulk, and with increased impetuosity hurries forward in its downward course,” the law only “augments the evil desire” for an object by making it forbidden.⁴⁵ Even, then, if the law were to constrain us to make proper choices, we would still be sinful on account of our desire to break the law, however much we have been conditioned or even conditioned ourselves to follow it – it simply convicts us of our base and sinful desires. In order to be

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Augustine, “On the Spirit and the Letter,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004) 6.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

truly free from sin, then, what is necessary is the reorientation of our desires toward that which is good. We need, in other words, to be able to genuinely desire to keep the law out of love, not simply out of fear of consequence.

For Augustine, the distortion of human willing and its pathogenic pattern occurs at the level of that which we desire – that object of desire toward which our wills are oriented as a valued good. As Rowan Williams notes in interpreting Augustine on this point, the corruption of the will is disastrous because of humanity’s pursuit of “false or destructive goals” and of “illusory goods.”⁴⁶ In Augustine’s example in *The Spirit and the Letter*, the desire to not follow the law, even if it is compulsory to do so, can be understood to be buttressed at some level by the belief that there is some personal benefit (pleasure, wealth, safety) in breaking it. This, ultimately, is an illusory good: it appears as good only as a result of our inability to perceive and cling to that which is truly good. As Williams notes it is a misreading of the world, a “mistaking of the unreal and groundless for the real.”⁴⁷ As a force that acts upon human nature by deeply distorting it, sin disfigures and confuses human understanding of what is good and thus sequesters the will’s proper orientation through a desire for that object which proves to be a false good.⁴⁸ In practical terms, as Williams argues, what this means is that the distorting force of sin, when combined with the powers of the human intellect and imagination has the immense capacity to shape human willing through the creation of false and illusory goods. The malleability of human willing, then, turns not primarily on its ability to be

⁴⁶ Rowan Williams, “Insubstantial Evil,” in *Augustine and His Critics*, ed. Robert Dodaro and George Lawless (New York: Routledge Press, 2000), 111.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁴⁸ What makes the good false is not that it is something inherently nefarious (as indeed for Augustine, nothing created is inherently nefarious – evil can only exist as the corruption of something inherently good) but rather that it is a good that is not God and therefore not truly good.

compelled to act in opposition to that which it views as good, but through the corruption of the good toward which the will is oriented. The control of the good to which we are oriented is beyond us, according to Augustine. We cannot control what it is that we want.⁴⁹

For Augustine, then, the re-orientation of our desires toward that which is truly good can only be accomplished by divine action: since all congenitally possess concupiscence (disordered desire), all find themselves in need of grace. Even infants, Augustine argues, in their very helplessness, in the “darkness of their rational intellect” that contrasts with the rational free will of Adam (who was created in adult form), demonstrate the distortedness of human nature, even if they have not committed actualized sin.⁵⁰ They, too, are in need of God’s grace. The primary problem in Pelagius’s understanding of willing, then, is that he attributes our ability to turn towards and choose the good ourselves. For Augustine, the result of this is a severely ascetic moralism, in which we are not only responsible for our sinful condition (which Augustine affirms) but also possess the means of turning from it. We must, therefore, always be in anxiety as to whether we are making proper choices – the possibility of our very righteousness rests on

⁴⁹ Augustine, “On the Spirit and the Letter,” 60. Augustine argues here that God brings about our re-orientation by “acting on the incentives of our perceptions, to will and believe, either externally by evangelical exhortations...or internally, where no man has in his own control what shall enter into his thoughts, although it appertains to his own will to consent or to dissent.” God works to re-orient what it is we desire back to Godself – the source of true goodness and “sheds love abroad in our hearts’ – we consent through our actions upon our desire, but that desire itself is shaped by God. The converse, then, is also true in this case. Since human nature is alienated from God on account of Adam’s sin, our desires are acted upon by the myriad of sinful forces that affect our desires.

⁵⁰ Augustine, “On the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins and the Baptism of Infants,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, vol. 5*, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 1.66-69. Augustine’s argument here, while seeming strange and almost inverted to modern readers, essentially holds that if Adam in his pre-lapsarian state as a rational, obedient creature possessing unconstrained free will, is the model of God’s good (although as he is able to sin, not perfect – not as humanity will be eschatologically – unable to sin) creation, and if in remaining so, he would have been able to propagate more humans through means other than sexual reproduction, then infants in their helplessness and irrationality must mark out an effect of the distortion of human nature and thus the inheritance of sin and guilt.

our own capacity to will to choose the good. For Augustine, our very orientation towards and desire for the good is corrupted by sin. Consequently, we no longer have the capacity to choose that which is good or act well apart from divine grace.

In summary, then, Augustine presents a view of postlapsarian human willing that is sufficiently different than earlier theologians – in describing the human will as bound, he is offering a distinct qualification to the notion of “free will.” For Augustine, he would affirm that “free will” means volition – the capacity to choose: but as our willing is done in service of our disoriented desires, it is bound in patterns that we cannot escape by ourselves. Since we congenitally inherit the state of alienation from God that Augustine names as “rebellion against God,” we are guilty before God. We act out of this condition, and thus are responsible for our own bad acts; but due to the broken nature we inherit, there is a sense that we also “cannot help it.” Augustine, then qualifies the “free will” concept that exerted such a force on early discussions of sin in the thought of Irenaeus, Origen and Gregory and affirms absolutely the goodness of God and complicity of humanity in our own broken state. What emerges in the anti-Pelagian writings is another concept critical to the discussion – the totality of God’s grace in salvation.⁵¹ For Augustine, the moralism that results from a Pelagian view misses something critical about our human nature – the universality of our participation in sin. The Pelagian view makes the efficacy of God’s grace dependent on human willing and Augustine finds this untenable. God’s grace for Augustine comes to those who are totally alienated from the capacity to choose the good, who are completely unable to earn that grace for themselves.

⁵¹ By this I mean the totality of God’s grace for those whom God saves. Augustine is obviously not a universalist.

This capacity becomes key in differentiating the Augustinian from Pelagian understanding of sin itself. For Pelagius the human capacity to will rightly endures after the fall and sin thus becomes particular “bad acts.” Augustine doesn’t dispute that actualized actions are indeed sins, but due to his doctrine of the bondage of the will, is able to affirm a broader understanding of sin itself, in which “original sin” connotes the initial sin of Adam as well as the condition in which all subsequent humanity finds itself. Augustine’s conception of sin thus reflects the power of sin as a more diffuse force that affects and forms, but is not limited to, willed actualizations. This congenital corruption connotes a radical break with the original divine plan for ultimate human immortality and its corrupting effects present the power of sin as a force that distorts human willing both from within and without. This presents a significantly more complex moral system than that of Pelagius – sin and wrong are simultaneously recognized as things we do and the conditions and forces from which those “bad acts” spring. There is more in play, in other words, than simply our own “bad acts.”

McFadyen and the Compulsion and Sequestration of the Will

Augustine’s complex view of sin and human willing provides a framework for a deeper examination of the most acute examples of violence and wrongness we encounter. Alistair McFadyen, in *Bound to Sin*, re-interprets an Augustinian view of original sin in a modern context in order to test its ability to hold “descriptive power” in two particular pathological situations – the holocaust and the abuse of children. He argues that many contemporary constructions of morality, like Pelagius, place considerable faith in the autonomy of the individual – that each person is their own efficient cause. Within this

construction of morality, one is either entirely responsible for one's own behavior or forced in a way in which one "had no choice" but to act in a certain manner and therefore not responsible for one's own behavior. McFadyen argues that the moral universe is considerably more complex, and he seeks to recover a language of sin that simultaneously holds people accountable before God for their actions and at the same time identifies the inherited, universal sinful condition from which those actions spring. In order to demonstrate this, McFadyen examines two undeniably pathogenic sets of human behavior – the Nazi killings of Jews during the holocaust and the sexual abuse of children. In testing the ability of original sin to provide a compelling and descriptive morality, McFadyen seeks to demonstrate the way in which outside forces can deeply distort the lives, willed actions, and desires of those caught up in these limit situations. Interacting with psychological and sociological findings, he interprets original sin in ways that resonate deeply with many of the forces acting upon us in our modern world.

Though interpreting a classical doctrine, McFadyen brings out a revised conceptual vocabulary – speaking about the effects of our alienation from God in terms of the obfuscation and confusion of what is real and what is right. He articulates the capacity of this alienation to "sequester" our willing in particular orbits and very limited "horizons of choice." McFadyen introduces a particular way of speaking of the force that desire holds over human willing, arguing that desire "compels" the will.⁵² Building on the Augustinian notion that our willing is simply the modality by which we exercise of

⁵² McFadyen is the term "compulsion" to describe how the will is influenced by what it is that we desire. Augustine would argue that the will follows desire, and McFadyen articulates this same idea by arguing that desire compels the will to act in certain ways. It is essentially semantic, but it merits clarification as McFadyen is not arguing that one's will is compelled away from what one desires, but that one's desires are distorted by external forces and also that our desires can be preyed upon and twisted in ways both extremely toxic and harmful to ourselves and others.

our own personal agency – even in situations in which we would wish to do otherwise – McFadyen argues that as the sum of one’s desires, goals and interests, one’s “life-intentionality” is distorted and re-directed through pathological situations.

In order to build to these very particular insights, McFadyen first distills four powerful corollaries from Augustine’s conception of original sin that help to frame his interpretation of the doctrine and demonstrate its contrast to the ways we often construct modern morality. First, he holds that sin is “contingent” – it is an outcome that arose from the condition of free will, but it was not an *inevitable* outcome. He uses this term to describe how Augustine holds together prelapsarian free will while simultaneously affirming the goodness of creation as created by God. Things could have been other than they are – the notion of the contingency of sin takes seriously the possibility that Adam, as Augustine stated, could have remained in communion with God and passed into immortality and perfection without suffering death. Human nature and human willing are not sinful by virtue of existing as such – rather, that human nature as we inherit it from Adam is distorted. Our nature, and most particularly, our bound will, is not what it was meant to be, or what it initially was as created by God.

Second, he argues that sin’s effects on humanity and human life are “radical.” The effects of sin poison humanity at its deepest levels and corrupt not simply our actions on occasion or in episodic fashion, but comprise and constitute the very situation of human willing and action.⁵³ Our willing takes place within the bounds of an agency that is alienated from that good to which our desires should be, but are not, oriented. The break here from true goodness is profound – the reality of sin, McFadyen argues,

⁵³ McFadyen, *Bound to Sin*, 17.

“endures as a distortion of our fundamental ways of being in the world.”⁵⁴ Its power is so pervasive and ubiquitous that it effects our internal compositions as well as our relationality with each other in deeply distorting ways, affecting the “conditions of human sociality” and the most basic ways we interact in the world. In essence, sin’s hold on humanity is so radical that we cannot act in the world apart from its distorting effects. It conditions the “most basic patterns” of our lives individually and together.⁵⁵

Thirdly, what Augustine would describe as the congenital propagation of sin, McFadyen identifies as sin’s “pre-personal” communication to us. Given the power of the conditioning force of relationality that he describes in the “radical” corollary, arguing that we inherit the sinful condition pre-personally affirms the Augustinian notion that while sin does deeply distort our relations and social construction, we do not “learn” to be sinful through social conditioning. As a congenital corruption, McFadyen argues that sin, as a congenital corruption, “infects us prior to our achievement of personhood” – our very constructions of self and individuality are distorted in the formative stages by sin.⁵⁶ As such, sin is inescapable – it is a part of who we are as individual agents as well as communal society. Through this inheritance, we also incur guilt as a result of the alienation from the source of true goodness.

Lastly, since all humanity finds itself in this radical condition that is inherited congenitally, it naturally follows that sin is “universally extensive.” The ubiquity of sin both as an internal and external force means that all human agency is marred by sin, by the inescapable condition from which we act: “because we are all in a situation of sin, we

⁵⁴ McFadyen, *Bound to Sin*, 17.

⁵⁵ McFadyen, *Bound to Sin*, 17.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

all commit individual acts of sin.”⁵⁷ Every human being, by virtue of being human, inherits through Adam the congenital sinful condition and distorted human nature. Augustine understands this as a sense of universal guilt – all are alienated, by virtue of being human and the inheritance of a nature that is in opposition to God and therefore guilty of the sinful condition that they bear. McFadyen argues that sin’s universality is a result of our personal decisions and actions which graft us as individuals into the corporate reality of sin.

Critical for McFadyen’s interpretation of Augustine is this interaction between the corporate reality of sin and our individual participation in it. He notes that against Pelagius, Augustine maintained that the will was not a separate, “neutral organ of free choice,” but rather, an integrated part of the willing agent, thus affected by the focus, desires, goals, and ambitions of that agent in a certain disposition. The disposition of this willing agent is “the whole of a person’s active intentionality.”⁵⁸ This intentionality is the orientation and direction of the person’s desire and affections. By nature of being so integrated within and not separated from the internal mechanisms of the willing agent, the will is oriented towards that which the agent values as the good. It is not neutral and apart from, but deeply embedded in and guided by our desire toward that which we determine to be good. In short, the will is not “self-motivating and self-moving,”⁵⁹ but always compelled towards the valued good and also affected and further embedded by the internal desire and pursuit of this good.

Interpreting Augustine, McFadyen argues that willing is the “addition of personal energy” to the pursuit of the valued good, whether constricted by circumstance or outside

⁵⁷ McFadyen, *Bound to Sin*, 16.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

entity or otherwise unconstrained.⁶⁰ Key for Augustine is that our willing is voluntary and operative, even if our choices are constrained. Not only can external forces (in the case of grace and faith, the activity of the Spirit) then affect and “compel” our will and orient our desires, but the very addition of our personal energy to these desires leads to the “intensification of the dynamic which compels willing.”⁶¹ Thus our habitual actions and continued application of personal energy further embed and cement the will in the orientation of the desire we have pursued. The will can be acted upon for good or ill and is vulnerable to the shaping effects of outside forces.

McFadyen argues that these external forces deeply distort and disorient our own “internally-directed life orientation.”⁶² Although such distortions may originate from outside of us, we internalize and intensify them in our own lives. He views sin as a radical distortion in the patterns of relationality from which we form our lives. Sin is not reducible to individual acts, but is rather a dynamic network of relations and interactions. These distortions have tendrils that McFadyen describes as “fields of force” that affect a network of victims, perpetrators and bystanders – all of whom are connected and enmeshed in the sinful condition.⁶³ In this way, the will can be said to be “bound” in the midst of larger sinful dynamics and pathologies.

This understanding of compulsion is critical to McFadyen’s reading of Augustine as it expresses the claim that although our choices appear to be (and in a real sense truly are) constricted, our actions remain voluntary. The sense that we retain our own capacity

⁶⁰ Ibid., 182.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 19, 188.

⁶³ This is not to argue that all actors occupy the same space in terms of accountability and/or responsibility, but to note that these “fields of force” bind them all and that their relationality and agency are distorted in differing ways.

to commit our personal energies in an orientation that can be twisted is key for McFadyen's effort to hold together both an accountability for our individual sins and yet an acknowledgment that we inherit the sinful condition from which we commit sins. McFadyen employs Augustine's category of sin because it is broad enough to name not simply sinful acts, but also the sinful conditions and compulsions that constrain our choices. We commit and participate in sin because we commit active personal energy in willing, this willful action does not exhaust the definition of sin. Rather, Augustine understands the term in a significantly more broad and pervasive way as "opposition to God."⁶⁴ Therefore, circumstances themselves can be sinful and defined as situations in which we are compelled to sin. We actively will and sin through our active commitment of personal energy, but both the situation and our action are sinful and reflect a will bound in a sinful orientation through the constraint of choices imposed by the situation.

Another key point that McFadyen gleans from Augustine's understanding of sin and willing is the way in which external forces distort and disorient our life-intentionality. Since the will is active in the context of a concretely lived life and not external to it or separated from it, Augustine argues that the external forces can penetrate the will and cause distortions in one's "internally-directed life orientation."⁶⁵ As already noted, McFadyen uses the term "fields of force" to describe the powerful and dynamic compliment of external and internal energies that twist and distort one's internal orientation and intentionality. Even then the actions that we originate in our own commitment of personal energy spring from and "bear the marks of" our own distorted

⁶⁴ Ibid., 187.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 188.

and compelled intention.⁶⁶ Though a distortion may originate from outside of us, through our willing, we internalize and intensify the distortion in our own lives. McFadyen notes that because of our participation in and internalization of these dynamics in our own lives, Augustine does not discuss them as external to us. In sin, then we are accountable for our own actions though they are bound and compelled by forces that did not originate within ourselves.

From this conception of sin and willing, McFadyen distills four points of congruence with the pathologies of the holocaust and child abuse. These points of congruence run counter to Pelagian, moralistic notions of sin and provide a richer and more nuanced definition in keeping with the traditional conception of original sin. If the most basic way to understand an Augustinian interpretation of sin is in terms of its ability to disorient people “in their acting, reacting and in the very seat of their subjectivity away from God and the good,” then these points of congruence illustrate ways in which that disorientation occurs in pathological situations.⁶⁷ They provide, then, the outlines of a framework for answering the question “Does an understanding of sin have the ability to show us a fuller reality?”

First, McFadyen he argues that sin is operative not as individual, atomistic acts, but as a dynamic network of numerous relations and interactions. This network of relationships is “supra-personal,” occurring within the sphere of the individual self, but the self is enmeshed in and participates in a larger framework of actions and relations that

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 197.

shape the condition of sin.⁶⁸ Our willing, compelled by these fields of force, sustains and propagates this sinful condition.

Second, the pathological dynamic invades and disfigures the desires, directions and very lives of everyone involved in the pathology: “victims, perpetrators, and bystanders.”⁶⁹ This disorientation compels a commitment of personal energy through means of “consent, compliance, acquiescence and commission.”⁷⁰ This distortion takes place for the different actors in different ways, depending on the nature of the influence; but in these ways we participate in the sinful condition actively bring its disorienting effects into our own lives by doing so. In arguing this, McFadyen underscores one of his key arguments about the radicality of sin: even if one is largely the victim of a particular violation or “bad act,” because one’s willing is always active, there are ways in which one is bound in the dynamic by which sin is internalized and distorting. Whether perpetrator, victim or bystander, we all become bound in the distortions that result from our participation in the larger dynamics and intensify the effects (which we can almost never envision or predict) on ourselves and others.

Third, the pathological dynamic confuses our understanding of what is real (particularly in terms of the possibilities and choices we have in our agency), of what is “true and false, valuable and pathogenic, good and bad, right and wrong” and most importantly: why it is so.⁷¹ In other words, sin obfuscates what is truly good and valuable amidst the multitude of false claims to goodness and value. Since our willing follows a pursuit of that which we desire, it is that very desire which can be so

⁶⁸ Ibid., 195.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

misdirected and confused. Yet McFadyen also points to one of the most insidious effects of the pathological dynamic – it isolates individuals from the very criteria from which they could judge something to be right or wrong. It is the sequestration of our capacities to reason as well as to morally evaluate. Alienated from that which is truly good and valuable, there is no “Archimedian point” from which we can evaluate our actions from a disinterested place that is not enmeshed in the very dynamic we are attempting to evaluate. What should be important and sharp differences become relativized within a sea of competing values.

Fourth, and closely related to the third, the pathological dynamic erects a barrier to a sense of meaning and value that transcends the sinful condition and situation in which we find ourselves. The realities we experience often appear to constrict our choices in totality – with the powerfully binding effect of cutting off notions of good and evil that would allow us to get a firmer grasp on the realities of our situation.

The Sequestration of the Will in the Case of the Nazi Killing Units

These four congruencies help to connect McFadyen’s theological argument and its Augustinian roots to his conception of willing as it takes place in concrete pathological situations – first as examined through the willing of the victims, perpetrators and bystanders of the holocaust.⁷² As a pathology that affected an immense network of complex relationships (an entire nation and arguably the majority of the world), McFadyen’s argument about the bound will in the setting of the holocaust hinges on two of these four congruences - the concept of restricted choice and confused notions of reality. What in an earlier section he describes as “the binding of reason” beneath a

⁷² It should be noted that this is reading these criteria back into an earlier section of *Bound to Sin*. However, it is clear that the framework of willing and its relation to a working definition of sin as applicable to the pathologies discussed is built on/reflects these factors.

“totalitarian ideology” is in effect, the constriction of the choices and life-intentionalities of those whose concrete lives are lived under the Nazi regime.⁷³ The imposition of a new reality described by the utopian vision of a racially pure Europe and a powerful German Reich encompassed all the German citizens in its breadth and distortion. This newly imposed sense of reality and totalitarian reason thus boils down all sense of rational, moral choice to one: accept or reject this reality. McFadyen describes the choice as one of responsibility: “responsible acceptance or irresponsible rejection of ‘reality.’”⁷⁴ As he explores notions of what willing looks like in the holocaust, a major assumption for the “cogs” and “killers” is that this distorted reality forms the effective working bounds of their capacity to will: the cog and killer (those at the bottom of the chain of command) have no power to choose to dispute the overall ends (the ideologies and strategies behind the Nazi policies), but must commit their energies to the means available in pursuit of these non-chosen goals. There are specific forces acting to bind the willing of those in the killing units. The killing units in McFadyen’s analysis effectively operate as a subset of the “cog,” albeit one charged with a heinous task, and the will of those within these units is bound by the same forces as those operative for the “cogs.”

The killers are separated from a greater framework of meaning and responsibility through the rigid structure and military discipline inherent in the chain-of-command. The front-line killers are not the ones who have made the decision to kill, so there is a separation from a sense of responsibility. The killers may not choose what their orders are, and thus they are separated from a personal sense of responsibility for them. From the killer’s perspective, the responsibility for the killing lies with the decision-maker.

⁷³ Ibid., 88.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 118.

They might have willed otherwise (decided not to kill), if the choice was theirs to make. Their willing is then “sequestered”⁷⁵ in a strange moral framework: their responsibility is not to determine whether they should kill or not, but to follow orders in the most effective and efficient manner possible.

Through the structure and firm emphasis on obedience and discipline, their access to a transcendent notion of right and wrong is effectively blocked. The responsibility was to do what had to be done, to do one’s share and one’s duty both in the sense of the unit and the larger task of the nation. The sphere of choice and moral responsibility became one shaped primarily by loyalty to the unit. As McFadyen argues, this is not to suggest that “neither willing nor morality are inoperative here,”⁷⁶ but rather that the horizons of willing and morality have been greatly restricted. In the absence of access to higher-level decisions about policy and orders, the soldier employs his moral energies towards the virtue of loyalty. Loyalty to the profoundly powerful “network of interrelations and interactions,”⁷⁷ illustrated at its most concrete and penetrating form in military units, strongly limits individual choice and shapes willing in pursuit of group rather than individual goods.

Willing, then is still active, but bound deeply by these powerful forces. Within this restricted horizon of choice, McFadyen reinterprets Augustine’s notion of *voluntas* as “the addition of personal and subjective commitment to that which one experiences as being outside the realm of one’s own free choice in the strict sense.”⁷⁸ This is an almost identical parallel to McFadyen’s illustration of Augustine’s notion of a will that appears

⁷⁵ Ibid., 119.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 120.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 195.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 120.

to be compelled: a hostage situation in which a person and his family are held hostage, the man is given a weapon, and told that “unless he shoots a third party, he and his family will be murdered.”⁷⁹ In the case of the Nazi killing units, the killers themselves may not have chosen to kill if given the choice, but in their perception, they did not have a choice that they could “responsibly exercise” not to kill.⁸⁰ Their personal energies of willing are applied to the task of killing, as it is not forced but compelled, and therefore the killers internalize and propagate this distorted dynamic. It becomes more and more a part of them and their own identity.

This internalization is accomplished in a specific and critical way for the killing units. McFadyen describes how the units’ repeated participation in “mass murder” then “normalized it, desensitizing perpetrators.”⁸¹ The killers were conditioned against any qualms or reservations about killing and its transcendent “wrongness” through repeated participation. Thus the practice of killing and its subsequent normalization in the perception of the killers effectively restricted access to any notions of morality outside the realm of loyalty and responsibility to the unit. Additionally, any remaining “scruples” were overcome through a cultural conditioning of “machismo,” in which such resistance to performing acts that seemed uncouth was deemed weakness and reflected a lack of courage.⁸² Combined with the use of alcohol by those involved in the killing (orchestrated by those in higher positions), notions of reality were confused through the creation of an entirely different conception of what is valuable and right. Being a good

⁷⁹ This refers to Augustine’s well-known section on volition and ability (chapter 53) in *On the Spirit and the Letter*. Augustine holds that if one really prefers not to do something, even if he is threatened with consequences, he will not do it. Therefore, one cannot say, even when facing dire consequence, that one’s willing is inactive or passive. One can always resist, in the situation McFadyen describes, if one truly values a good of nonviolence over the good of protecting oneself from the consequence.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*

man, a good soldier, or even a good German meant simply to do your share: to obey orders.

Child Abuse and the Trapping of the Mind

While McFadyen's discussion of the Nazi killers revolved around sin's capacity to sequester willing in pathological patterns, his discussion of child abuse highlights sin's capacity to deeply distort the relationality of everyone involved and its ability to bind those involved in it in secrecy – effectively cutting off them all off from larger frameworks of meaning. What is particularly remarkable in McFadyen's analysis of the dynamics of abuse is the way in which he argues that despite the clear power differential between the abuser and victim, the will of the victim is active and internalizes the distortion of the abuse.⁸³ In effect, he powerfully demonstrates how our desires themselves, particularly in children can be twisted, confused and disoriented by the abusive relational dynamic. These desires and the choices made in their pursuit have an isolating effect on the abuser and victim who together are bound in the pattern of abuse. This distortion of normal relationality affects all those with whom either is in relationship. The tendrils of the distortion affect the entire web of relationships the pair have now and will have in the future.

Rather than a singular act of violation, McFadyen understands childhood sexual abuse as the description of a distorted and distorting sense of relationality. McFadyen, who has extensive experience as a law enforcement officer in England, notes that in order for abuse to occur, the child has to be isolated from caring and nurturing relationships.

Abusers either select a victim who is already separated from the network of supportive,

⁸³ McFadyen is careful to make clear that the responsibility for the acts and situation of abuse lies with the abuser, not the victim. The victim and abuser are not on equivalent levels of power and control – yet even so, McFadyen argues persuasively that they are both distorted by the relationship.

loving and healthy adult relationships or “prepare the ground” for the abuse by isolating their victim from these relationships. This takes place through “a great deal of adult cunning, foresight and ingenuity and planning, manipulating and manoeuvring the adult relationships in their general situation.”⁸⁴ Thus, abuse comes when a child is in a situation that is already permeated with the distortions that the abuser has created or has entered into. McFadyen notes that most child abusers are not sexually attracted to children, but appear to act out of a need to recreate an abusive power dynamic that they experienced as a child – abusers often have a history of being abused themselves. Abusers then recreate the same relational dynamics out of their own distorted sense of relationality that can be traced back to the way they internalized the distortions they experienced. By isolating the child socially and psychologically and then manipulating the child’s sense of trust, the abuser does not simply commit an act or acts of abuse, but sets up “a deeply distorting, distorted and damaging relationship.”⁸⁵

The child’s active willing is an integral part of both continued isolation and secrecy as well as the child’s internalization of abuse. McFadyen notes that it is critical that the child, particularly in recovery from abuse, does not simply see themselves as a passive and impotent object that has been acted upon, but an agent that must survive the situations in which his or her agency has been manipulated. Within the scope of the abuse, however, the manipulation of the child’s active agency is also the powerfully damaging and distorting aspect that binds them to isolation and secrecy. This often occurs when the abuser will offer rewards or inducements (intimacy and affection) as

⁸⁴ McFadyen, *Bound to Sin*, 62.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 61.

incentives for the abuse.⁸⁶ As the child desires these benefits, which may “outweigh” the abuse they have to endure in their own reasoning, they become confused and come to think of themselves as willing the acts of abuse and the abusive relationship itself. The child then often sees herself as responsible for the abuse and bears the shame and guilt of that responsibility.

This sense of shame and guilt bind the child further within the abusive relationship, and their active willing in light of it often poison their future search for identity. The threat of discovery becomes the threat that their own participation and willing of the abuse will be discovered and condemned, and they then actively exercise willing against the discovery of the abuse. The dynamic, McFadyen notes, becomes totalizing within a vicious circle – the child who actively wills against discovery because of the perceived condemnation of their own role in the abuse then “may experience difficulty in distinguishing between willing secrecy and having willed abuse” and may come to understand that through willing secrecy, they have “causal responsibility” for the abuse itself. As such, isolated from a larger framework of social relationships and those who would potentially intervene, the victim of abuse works actively to ensure that there is no intervention, that the abuse is not discovered. Further, even while the child’s active willing is what eventually enables recovery and “psychological survival through the reconstruction of identity,” as the child’s future willing is done around the construction of an identity that is based on the “reality of abuse.” Thus, even after the abuse has ended, the abuse itself so often dominates the survivor’s sense of self that every act she takes simply “further strengthens abuse’s power, reconfirms and more deeply embeds it.”⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Ibid., 123.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 125.

The *victim* of abuse, in other words, can rebrand themselves as a *survivor* of abuse, but cannot be fully free of the distortions – the abuse becomes “a prime constituent of *voluntas*,” and the survivor’s willing “cannot free itself from it.”⁸⁸

Another dynamic of abuse that is salient to this study is McFadyen’s understanding of the power of habituation to embed willing and increase desire in certain directions. In manipulating the consent of victims through benefits and rewards, the abuser may incrementally increase the abuse or the severity of it, habituating the victim’s “consent” to it “by degrees.”⁸⁹ This gradual habituation, and the child’s perceived acceptance of it, confuses the line between what is normal and what is abusive to the point that the child can no longer clearly distinguish the two, and more corrosively, becomes removed from any criteria from which she could do so. Even when the child reaches the point that she desires the abuse to end, she has been conditioned to accept the abuse and “may feel pressed to consent because she senses that she has, in a sense, already consented to them by accepting those which now, from this perspective, appear not so different.”⁹⁰ In her own mind, the victim, becomes “trapped in the trajectory” of her own choices and loses the psychological foothold from which she could resist the abuse.

From the perspective of the abuser, habituation in rehearsing fantasies of abuse can greatly increase his desire for the event to become reality. McFadyen notes that for those abusers who are sexually attracted to children, the “imaginative rehearsal of sexual acts whilst masturbating” can greatly enhance his desire to “realize the acts of

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 124.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

imagination.”⁹¹ The focus and intensity of the marriage of internal fantasy and physical pleasure brings the desire to the fore of the imagination, and the habitual repetition of the act also has the effect of objectifying the children and “desensitizing abusers to feelings of guilt or shame” which would inhibit them from acting upon the desire.⁹² The act of masturbation, according to McFadyen, “reworks” the imagined situation into a “pleasurable and well-rehearsed fixation in which the actual and imagined events become overwhelmingly associated with pleasurable feelings,” rather than the inhibiting notions of guilt and shame.⁹³ It normalizes the act in the mind of the abuser and gradually reconfigures the abuser’s conception of what is “permissible” and possible, while gradually dehumanizing the child at the center of the fantasy. Through the power of repeated habituation, in the mind of the abuser his own sexual behavior may be seen itself to be “unwilled” and to take on a momentum that he is powerless to stop himself. In this way, the power of habituation within the mind of the abuser has a parallel to the victim’s experience of habituation to “consenting” to increased abuse – in both cases, the actions and willing of the persons involved embed their willing in ways that they may feel unable to control

⁹¹ Ibid., 115.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

Chapter 2 - Fields of Force and the Contemporary Military Experience

“Now the earth was corrupt in God’s sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth.”
- Genesis 6:11,12 (NRSV)

As McFadyen articulates out the specific ways in which powerful forces act to constrict willing in these two pathological situations, his conceptual vocabulary provides a means to identify the ways in which willing is similarly restricted in other situations. The way he describes the functionality of original sin as of fields of force that distort our active willing, is particularly salient to depict many of the forces that shape the environment and landscape of the modern battlefield. The distorting power of violence, I am arguing here, cannot be understood in terms of modern moral constructs that hold individuals completely responsible for their actions, but as violence and its corruption tends to infect those that encounter it, it is necessary to take a much broader view of responsibility in order to attempt to describe it. It is critical to note that what I am arguing here is that original sin provides a way of envisioning and naming the distortions that bind our willing in patterns that are ultimately harmful and in this case, reflect our particularly violent participation in a violent world. Even if conflict is “necessary,” then, using the conceptual framework of original sin, we can distinguish between something we deem “necessary” and something we deem “good.” I am arguing, in essence, that we cannot participate in the force of violence in a way that is not deeply distorting and corrosive to our very being. In later chapters, I will describe the ways in which violence metastasizes through the psyche of the veteran and permeates our culture and that “sin” is a powerful way to name this metastatic force.

In this chapter, I will lay out the ways in which the fields of force McFadyen describes are present in particular ways in the training of military members, their experiences of military life and the pressures of the combat environment. Many of the ways in which McFadyen describes the sequestration of the will within Nazi killing units are salient simply because there are significant commonalities in the nature, structure, and mission of most militaries.⁹⁴ Yet his emphasis on the ways that relationality is deeply distorted in and through situations of child abuse and the ways in which both the abuser and victim become bound in secrecy also are helpful lenses through which to view the power of sin in the extreme violence of the battlefield.

It is worth reiterating here that in naming these forces and suggesting the ways in which the willing of combatants is distorted and internalized, I am not attempting to demonstrate their guilt or ascribe blame to a group that does not usually receive it. My intention is quite the opposite. Like McFadyen (and Augustine before him) I am arguing against an interpretation of morality that assigns complete responsibility to any one person for their “sinful” actions. In demonstrating the power of external forces to distort the willing of combatants, it is my intention to highlight the pervasiveness of the sinful dynamic and the way in which the combatants are enmeshed within deeply violent (and therefore sinful) conditions and situations that have existed long before they have. Indeed, it will also become apparent that the forces acting upon them, while particularly acute and meaningful to combatants in the particular situation of combat, have roots and

⁹⁴ I am not suggesting a moral equivalence between the American (or any other) military and that of the Nazis. Doing so would, of course, be repugnant and horrendously disrespectful to the many members of the U.S. military who serve incomparably more honorable and less totalitarian ideals than the did those serving the Nazi regime. As McFadyen notes, there is a huge difference in affirming the universality of sin (we all are formed by and participate in sin) and the universality of sins (all sins are equal). The former is a corollary of original sin while the latter is clearly not.

tendrils that stretch into the deepest parts of our cultural history and collective memory. As the distortion and misapprehension of what it is that we should desire, it is my intention to exhibit awesome power of sin and violence to deform and bind the way we make the most basic decisions.

Grossman and the Pressure of Combat on the Psyche

In his seminal work *On Killing*, U.S. Army psychologist David Grossman puts forth a compelling theory about the human psyche in combat situations that is abundantly helpful in understanding how the force of violence binds the willing of combatants. He argues that as an evolutionary trait, human beings have an innate revulsion towards the killing of other human beings. It is likely that this particular injunction developed in order to give our species a greater chance at “winning” the evolutionary contest for long-term survival; the species that indiscriminately kills its own members seems to be at a significant evolutionary disadvantage. We experience a great deal of stress, then, in situations in which we are expected to kill other human beings as well as situations in which we encounter human beings willing to kill us. In light of this, what happens on the battlefield, in some ways, can be seen as a battle for the psyche of the combatants. Powerful pressures act on them in a myriad of ways, and as McFadyen argues, the combatant finds himself enmeshed in a powerful field of forces that bind his thinking and willing.

To understand the injunction against killing that Grossman describes, it is critical to understand the context within which it was initially demonstrated, as well as the military response to this discovery. Grossman opens his study by arguing that “there is within

most men an intense resistance to killing their fellow man.”⁹⁵ Contrary to popular belief, Grossman argues that the immediate threat to one’s own life, as well as the lives of one’s comrades is insufficient to motivate a soldier to kill, as it is apparent that “soldiers on the battlefield will die before they can overcome it.”⁹⁶ As evidence for this claim, he cites a stunning example from the civil war. Referencing historian F. A. Lord, he recounts “After the Battle of Gettysburg, 27, 574 muskets were recovered from the battlefield. Of these, nearly 90 percent (twenty-four thousand) were loaded. Twelve thousand...were found to be loaded more than once, and six thousand...had from three to ten rounds loaded in the barrel.”⁹⁷ The significance of this lies in the value of a loaded weapon on the black-powder era battlefield. During that time, Grossman argues, “More than 95 percent of the time was spent in loading the weapon, and less than 5 percent in firing it.”⁹⁸ Given this, he logically posits that “If soldiers were desperately attempting to kill as quickly and efficiently as they could, then 95 percent should have been shot with an empty weapon in their hand.”⁹⁹ This would mean that of the 27, 574 muskets found on the battlefield, only 1,379 should have been loaded. Instead, 24,000 were found loaded. Additionally, the fact that a soldier desperate to kill the enemy would have picked up any loaded weapon he could find to fire it makes the abundance of loaded weapons discarded on the battlefield even more surprising. Grossman then makes the uncontroversial assumption “that most of these discarded weapons...represent soldiers who had been unable or unwilling to fire their weapons...and then had been killed, wounded, or

⁹⁵ Grossman, *On Killing*, 4.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

routed.”¹⁰⁰ He thus deduces that most soldiers were not actively attempting to kill the enemy, as the evidence provided by the muskets strongly suggests that most of them were simply rehearsing the actions that were expected of them without performing the critical task of actually firing their weapon. Apparently wanting little to do with the act of killing at all, Grossman concludes further that the majority of men who had previously carried these discarded muskets “appear to have not even wanted to fire in the enemy’s general direction.”¹⁰¹

This finding is by no means unique to the Civil War, as it appears to be consistent with the actions of soldiers almost a century later as well. Grossman cites a study by World War II historian and U.S. Army Brigadier General S. L. A. Marshall that stated “of every hundred men along the line of fire during the period of an encounter, an average of only 15 or 20 ‘would take any part with their weapons.’ This was consistently true ‘whether the action was spread over a day, or two days or three.”¹⁰² What is again remarkable here is that given the nature of World War II equipment and engagements, an “encounter” for a soldier in this era would typically consist of considerably more intense enemy fire than a Civil War soldier would have experienced. Yet even in extreme danger, 80 to 85% of soldiers with a loaded weapon in hand refused to fire the weapon in an effort to eliminate the threat. Grossman contends that despite the intensity and repetitive drill that soldiers received in weapons training in this era, “quietly, at the moment of decision...these soldiers found themselves to be conscientious objectors who were unable to kill their fellow man.”¹⁰³ While he is uninterested in discovering exactly

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 25.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 22.

¹⁰² Ibid., 3.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 25.

how and why this resistance to killing exists, he concludes that it “is there and that it exists as a result of a powerful combination of instinctive, rational, environmental, hereditary, cultural and social factors.”¹⁰⁴ Grossman argues that it is the soldier’s confrontation with this resistance within himself that produces the greatest stress on the battlefield.

This stress is manifest in two particular ways around this psychological resistance to killing: through the soldier’s own revulsion at the thought of having to kill another person and through the soldier’s dread of facing an enemy who is willing to kill him. Grossman argues that the issue revolves around the capacity to deny human status to the enemy “other,” arguing that not only does the soldier “resist killing and the obligation to kill, but he is equally horrified by the inescapable fact that someone hates him and denies his humanity enough to kill him.”¹⁰⁵ In naming these two particular ways that the psyche experiences combat stress, Grossman identifies a major tension in the life of a combatant: he has an evolutionary psychological stance against killing other human beings and dreads facing a determined enemy, yet the performance of his duty requires that he is able to both face and kill the enemy if necessary. This tension, while profound for the combatant, is a major dilemma for societies, governments, militaries and even individual units that are called upon to engage in combat. Many of the forces that distort the willing of combatants in combat are either direct outgrowths of the “irrational hatred” of those who set the injunction aside, or significantly act upon the combatant’s default desire to avoid killing.

Habituation and Training

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 39.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 79.

As early as Korea and the Vietnam War, governments began to take notice of the “problem” presented by large groups of non-firers and began taking efforts to combat it. Owing to the need to field effective armies that will be able to accomplish military objectives, militaries condition their combatants in very particular ways in order to produce warriors who will kill the enemy and overcome their dread of those willing to kill them. As Grossman highlights, this conditioning occurs throughout the training process and begins almost immediately. He is careful to note that none of this is done in a strictly explicit manner, but is often found in the subtle (and sometimes not so subtle, yet “unofficial”) ways in which training is conducted. Speaking from his own experience as an Army officer, Grossman notes that “in my two decades of military service, not a single soldier, sergeant, or officer, nor a single official or unofficial has communicated an understanding that conditioning was occurring” during training, yet “from the standpoint of a psychologist who is also a historian and a career soldier, it has become increasingly obvious to me that this is exactly what has been achieved.”¹⁰⁶

In basic training, one of the first things a recruit encounters is a drill instructor screaming commands at them, often invading the recruit’s personal space while employing a threatening and demanding posture. Most recruits will “enjoy” the close attention of their drill instructors for several weeks as they adapt to the military environment and learn their chain of command, how to properly march, wear their uniforms, fire their weapons, and work as a group. The presence of someone constantly yelling and pushing the recruits is obviously creates, by design, a stressful environment and teaches the recruits how to achieve tasks within this situation of prolonged stress. Yet Grossman argues that its purpose is also more subtle – it implicitly inoculates the

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 253.

recruits against “irrational hatred.” The recruit is faced with someone who appears to have no regard for him as a human being and to despise him despite knowing nothing about his life, history, or character. In this way, the “hatred” of the drill instructor, even though a façade, desensitizes the recruit to the dread of facing someone who despises them. One that goes through this training has been forced to perform his tasks while facing the dread of the instructor’s attention and hatred and by the end of training has likely developed some way of dealing with it.

The process of desensitization is even more critical in preparing combatants to overcome their inherent psychological revulsion against killing. Since the injunction appears to be an evolutionary development that helps safeguard the life of the species as a whole by discouraging killing other humans, the measures the military employs act essentially to “short-circuit” the injunction by temporarily convincing the soldier that what he or she is doing is something other than killing another human being. The first method is a systemic dehumanization of the enemy by repeatedly identifying them by some form of slur. While seemingly simple, it has the effect of subtly defining the enemy as something other than human. As Grossman notes, it is an ancient practice. Many primitive tribes, he argues, “took names [for themselves] that translate as “man” or “human being,” thereby automatically defining those outside of the tribe as simply another breed of animal to be hunted and killed.”¹⁰⁷ When we use terms like “Japs, Krauts, gooks, slopes, dinks, and Commies,” Grossman argues that we accomplish the same psychological task. In contemporary America, military officials who would acknowledge a training benefit of such slurs or condone their use would, of course, be

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 252.

excoriated and likely disciplined. In my own experience, the use of the term “haji”¹⁰⁸ for both enemy and civilian in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan was simply an accepted part of the military culture. In my view, it often implied a far lower level of civilization and higher level of savagery compared to ourselves and our allies.

A second way in which the way in which the military conditions its members to kill is through realistic training simulations. In these scenarios, the trainee shoots human-looking targets and becomes conditioned to watch them fall, “just as a living target would.”¹⁰⁹ Since the writing of *On Killing* in 1995, technology has advanced considerably and the training scenarios used by the military have become more and more realistic. As the trainee repeats this realistic training, firing at human targets becomes instinctual – Grossman describes the effect of the training as a Pavlovian response in which the action of firing becomes almost involuntary in response to a threat. Speaking of the Pavlovian conditioning technique, he notes that the process “of associating reward with a particular kind of behavior is the foundation of most successful animal training.”¹¹⁰ For the trainee, the reward comes in the form of immediate feedback: the target falls (or in more advanced simulations, an image or even an actor portraying the enemy goes to the ground wounded) and he is praised for achieving high scores in the simulation. In psychologically remapping firing as a reflexive action, the injunction against killing is essentially bypassed. Amidst the many euphemisms for attacking and killing (i.e., “engaging” and “neutralizing” one’s enemy in pursuit of one’s “objective”), the fact that one is actually killing another human being is driven from the fore of the

¹⁰⁸ This term appears to have been somewhat oddly borrowed from its proper usage to identify those Muslims who are on their pilgrimage to Mecca.

¹⁰⁹ Grossman, *On Killing*, 253.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

psyche – the decision to do so is effectively conditioned, in contrast to being a matter for consideration in a normal decision-making process.

In terms of McFadyen’s notion of the distorting power of sin in binding the will, certainly this particular form of conditioning distinctly narrows the horizons of choice of the trainees. In doing so, recalling McFadyen’s points of congruence between the pathologies of the holocaust and child abuse, it subtly erects a barrier to a larger sense of meaning that transcends the situation. It does so seemingly by distraction – the larger concerns and debates of policy fade away as the intensity of training in very focused areas increases. While it would be improper to argue that the combatant is completely programmed to act in a certain way, the training conditions the choice the combatant makes until it is almost involuntary. It could be argued that the Pavlovian understanding of this stretches the limits of Augustine and McFadyen’s critical insistence that the will is still active in the process. Yet it should be noted that the combatant is still acting and making choices, even in the repeated training scenario – they are assessing the threats and acting, firing on the closer targets first, making immediate tactical decisions about when to reload as well as (in more complex exercises) larger operational decisions involving their unit and its specialized members. Their choices simply take place within the strict confines of the scenario. Much of the repetition of military training involves making simple actions almost instinctual in order to save one’s conscious decision-making for tactical and operational decisions.¹¹¹ As the trainee repeatedly moves through the scenario, the Pavlovian conditioning mechanism removes the decision of “should I fire at my enemy” from his conscious decision-making. His willing is applied, not to this

¹¹¹ Airborne training is relatively straightforward, for example, but one spends three weeks in Airborne school practicing the commands and actions of jumping out of an airplane so that by the time the trainees perform the jump out of an aircraft, the actions are familiar and “feel” right.

decision, but as McFadyen notes with respect to the Nazi killing units, to efficacy. The trainee applies himself to the speed with which to carry out his mission and “neutralize” the enemy effectively along the way.

In one sense, this desensitization and conditioning bears similarity with the normalization of killing that McFadyen describes taking place in the Nazi killing units. However, what is occurring here is in many ways considerably deeper and perhaps even more troubling, as it appears to happen at an almost subliminal level. Even when a trainee has completed a live-fire training scenario numerous times, no killing has actually taken place, so it cannot be argued that a horrific action (or more properly in as Grossman notes, one’s revulsion to it) is being normalized. The conditioned response that the scenario-specific firing drill inculcates bears striking resemblance to an extremely conditioned habit – the trainee is habituated through continual repetition to act in a particular way. The force of the habit bends the will of the actor in a particular direction – the Pavlovian concept here functions simply as scientific analogy for the habituation’s effectiveness. As McFadyen argued, the child abuser’s will is sometimes bent in patterns by habituated fantasy, noting that the repeated imagining of a particular scenario (often paired in the case of the abuser with an autoerotic sexual release) increases the desire for the actual event imagined to come to fruition. Certainly military training scenarios, made increasingly realistic in both virtual and physical training environments are little different when paired with the euphoric reward of doing well and receiving praise from one’s superiors and increased status among one’s peers.¹¹² These scenarios inculcate a strong

¹¹² The Army now often sends units to training in bases in the Southwestern United States to “war-game” scenarios in an environment that most resembles the middle eastern areas to which they will be deployed. Units permanently stationed at these bases play the opposition forces in complex exercises designed to accommodate the units to battlefield conditions, actions, sights and sounds.

desire in many soldiers to “get into the fight” and to do in reality what they have been trained to do.¹¹³ The habituation re-shapes and forms the very desire of the trainees and thus embeds the paths in which they will exercise their agency.

Obedience and Authority – The Sequestration of Personal Energy

Perhaps the most obvious force acting on the willing of a soldier in the military setting is the human desire to obey. Stanley Milgram demonstrated the potency of obedience as a force over human willing through his experiments in the early 1960s. Through his experiments, he powerfully demonstrated that a figure of seemingly credible authority possesses a remarkable ability to influence a person to take a particular action, even when that action appears to harm and even kill another person.¹¹⁴ Reflecting on his experiments and the post-experiment interviews he conducted with his subjects, Milgram noted that in situations in which one is responding to the orders of an authority one judges to be legitimate, many saw themselves “not as a person acting in a morally accountable way but as the agent of external authority.”¹¹⁵ He argued that his findings demonstrated the profound level to which people understood the responsibility for their

¹¹³ In my own experience as a Special Operations Weather Team commander in Afghanistan, several of my younger airmen repeatedly requested to be placed with Army Special Forces teams that were experiencing repeated encounters with insurgents in order to “get into the fight.” These requests and the desire to be involved in active combat actually became a significant problem and often prevented them from properly carrying out their primary mission – to embed with the Army teams and send back weather data from the front.

¹¹⁴ Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1974). Milgram set up an experiment through which the test subject would be told to shock a person in another room with increasing levels of electricity by pushing levers (marked with increasing voltage levels from left to right) on a machine in front of them at the urging of a white coat-clad experimenter. While the “victim” in another room was an actor, and there were no actual shocks given, the subject doing the shocking understood themselves to be administering real shocks. What was a startling surprise, even to Milgram himself, was that the majority of subjects continued to shock the person, obeying the commands of the experimenter, even to the point where the “victim” appeared to be unconscious and even deceased. While many people exhibited obvious signs of stress during the experiment, particularly when the victim begged them to stop and screamed and shrieked in pain, the vast majority continued to shock him with increasingly higher voltages (even ones marked “XXX” at the end of the scale) when the experimenter urged them to continue.

¹¹⁵ Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority*, 8.

own actions to rest with the experimenter rather than themselves. For Milgram, this “disappearance of a sense of responsibility” on the part of the agent constituted “the most far-reaching consequence of submission to authority.”¹¹⁶ In part, Milgram argues that this is an inevitable consequence of the move to a differentiated society – part of moving to any hierarchy involves individuals relegating control to higher-level components. The behavior of individuals functioning in a hierarchical society is “modified in its functioning” – the suppression of individual direction and the acceptance of higher authority - in order to achieve a higher overall survivability for the larger group as a whole.¹¹⁷

Milgram describes this evolution within human nature as the move from autonomous individual to hierarchical citizen: the agentic shift. This shift into an “agentic state” is characterized by the relegation of moral authority to another, such that “a person is in an agentic state when he defines himself in a social situation in a manner that renders him open to regulation by a person of higher status.”¹¹⁸ Milgram argues that there are three primary factors that impact the agentic shift: the antecedent conditions that “prepare the ground” in the individual’s mind to accept this shift, the consequences of it in terms of how the individual’s behavior and thought processes are altered, and the binding factors that hold a person in this state. The antecedent conditions involve the creation of the criteria for the legitimacy of the authority in the cultural consciousness. He argues that there does not appear to be a high psychological standard for individuals to perceive an authority as legitimate, noting that “authority need not possess high status in the sense of ‘prestige’” in order to be effectively authoritative. He also argues that

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 131.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 134.

“external accouterments” such as distinctive dress, lab coats, uniforms, badges, rank insignia signify and bolster the perception of authority that conditions individuals to accept their shift into an agentic state. Another primary antecedent condition is the level to which the individual understands herself as a part of the system itself. The more integrated and embedded within the system one feels, the higher the degree of obedience. Finally, Milgram argues that a powerful component of the antecedent conditioning is the presence of an ideology that justifies the system and its authority, and precise level to which the surrounding culture provides “the overarching ideological justification” for the authority system itself.¹¹⁹

Within a conditioned authority structure, individuals can be shifted into an agentic state through the commands of individuals occupying higher positions. Within this state, several consequences are of salient interest to this study. First, within a powerful authority structure, Milgram argues that the “entire set” of an individual’s actions is “pervaded by his relationship to the experimenter” and he becomes absorbed in the effort of carrying out the tasks in order to “make a good appearance before this central figure.”¹²⁰ The authority structure itself takes on a level of moral order, and so to not carry on one’s tasks this way would be deemed by the individual to be a moral error. By far the most severe consequence is the loss of responsibility, for Milgram argues that “for a man to feel responsible for his actions, he must sense that the behavior has flowed from ‘the self.’”¹²¹ The move to the agentic state disconnects the individual from this personal ownership of the actions he is ordered to perform and further, the “evaluative mechanism” by which one assesses her own behavior is disrupted. If one has no actions

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 142.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 143.

¹²¹ Ibid., 147.

that stem from the self, one cannot evaluate them within the confines of his own moral code.

Once in the agentic state, Milgram proposes that a set of binding psychological factors hold the individual there. One of the primary forces is that of habit. Thus, during his experiments Milgram found that once initial instructions are given to the subject and they are followed, “the experimenter does not command the subject to initiate a new act but simply to continue doing what he is doing.”¹²² Certainly, this supports McFadyen’s conception of habituated and normalized willing. Milgram notes, again similarly to McFadyen, that once the subject has performed some actions, ceasing to perform similar actions in the future is tantamount to admission that the previous actions were “bad.” So there is a force that is something akin to a moral inertia built around the ego that prevents the individual from breaking from the agentic state. As a corollary, there is a sense of breaking a contract and commitment that would come from resisting the commands. If one has agreed to participate in an experiment, the individual felt a considerable obligation to continue with it, even when he or she desired at some level to stop participating.¹²³ To break this contract would be to reject the authority of the system, and given the ideological support it is accorded, to do so would involve “a severe social impropriety.”¹²⁴

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ This is a particularly interesting claim for Milgram to make, as he faced a great deal of ethical criticism on this exact point – that his subjects did NOT consent to participate in this particular kind of study – they were there under the auspices of conducting a study on memory. Yet it is also this very fact that stands as another remarkable support for Milgram’s arguments, for despite the fact that the subjects did not fully understand the experiment they were committing to, the vast majority felt that because they had agreed to participate in some study taking place here that they ceded almost complete authority to the experimenter, even when the study took them in directions they did not appear to want to go.

¹²⁴ Milgram, *Obedience to Authority*, 150.

The structure of the military presents an ideal authority structure for instilling obedience in its members in Milgram's conception and thus inculcates obedience in its members in exceptionally powerful ways.¹²⁵ In the United States, the military is perhaps the legitimate authority *par excellence* in terms of its level of prestige in American society, the commitment of its members, the ideology that surrounds it and its compartmentalization of responsibility. Its members swear allegiance directly to the Constitution, the founding document that establishes and enshrines the US government and which enjoys an almost mythic status among the American public. Although the military falls under the control and jurisdiction of the executive branch of government, its ultimate allegiance does not lie there, but to the Constitution itself and the ideals of goodness and democracy that come with it. War and those who fight them hold a hallowed place within American history – as Stanley Hauerwas argues, “War is America’s central liturgical act necessary to renew our sense that we are a nation unlike other nations.”¹²⁶ Consistently, military members top surveys of American views of

¹²⁵ An argument could be made that this statement is tautological. Milgram set out to understand the behavior of the Nazis during the holocaust, and so it could be argued that he entered the study with a strong bias in the direction of connecting authority structure with military organization. Yet as a counter-point, Milgram conducted his studies in a laboratory setting and went through a great deal of variations in order to isolate the element of authority in the presence of the experimenter. He was even surprised to find the power of the urge to obey to be as strong as it was, even in the variations that were manipulated to convey the least air of authority (study takes place in a shabby building in a blighted neighborhood, experimenter acts with less precision, etc.). In surveys of his colleagues in psychology before he began his experiments, he asked them to predict how many people would follow the experiment to its end - they predicted that one person in one thousand would do so. Milgram repeatedly found that almost 60% of the subjects obeyed. In other words, the if the power that an authority figure commands in these situations which involve minimal accouterments of authority and minimal commitment to the experiment (for 5 dollars pay), then it is not a stretch to see that in a situation of far more pressing, established and legitimate authority in which the individual is far more formally and psychologically committed to an organization that is valorized by the public, the power of obedience as a force cannot possibly be understated.

¹²⁶ Stanley Hauerwas , *War and the American Difference: Theological Reflections on Violence and National Identity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic Publishing, 2011), 4.

which professions contribute most to society and hold the highest ethical standards.¹²⁷ Additionally, military members commit to the authority structure in ways that bind them to the system of authority in almost absolute terms. They volunteer for military service, pledging themselves to the military enterprise even at the cost of their very lives. Once in that system, one has a clear place that is reinforced by the accouterments of one's uniform and those of the other members, particularly those higher in the chain of command. Rank insignia re-enforce the particular position one occupies and decorations and achievements that enhance prestige are noted with varying ribbons, patches and badges. Within the military chain of command, one knows exactly what the level of tasks that one is responsible for, the people that one is responsible for and the people that one is responsible to. The power of the military in setting the antecedent conditions for a shift into the agentic state is extremely strong.

The conditioning and normalization that Grossman describes both in initial training and throughout firing drills can be described as ways in which the experience of repetition and habituation bind the individuals into the agentic state. The social position the military occupies and the degree to which its members are inherently valorized as sacrificial protectors of democracy raise the moral consequence of disobedience to almost insurmountable levels within the closed system of the military organization. To exercise one's own conscience in disobedience is to risk the derisive scorn and moral judgment of the vast majority of American society.¹²⁸ In the heat of direct conflict, additional forces

¹²⁷ Pew Research Center, "Public Esteem for Military Still High," posted July 11, 2013, <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/07/11/public-esteem-for-military-still-high/> (accessed August 5, 2015) and Gallup Polling, "Honesty/Ethics in Professions," posted December 2015, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1654/honesty-ethics-professions.aspx> (accessed August 5, 2015).

¹²⁸ A primary case in point is that saga of US Army Sgt Bowe Bergdahl, who is widely believed to have voluntarily walked away from his duty station in the Patika Province of Afghanistan in 2009. He was

buttress the psychological desire to obey as disobedience may be linked to a betrayal of one's friends and responsibility for any damage done or lives lost in the skirmish with the enemy. Even for the combatant whose circumstances permit the contemplation of non-obedience, there are several intertwined psychological levels of authority and commitment that act as prohibitive forces. In his or her mind, to disobey a singular order also requires one to break one's own sacred oath to the Constitution which requires them to obey the lawful orders of those appointed over them. It also involves the violation of the legal contract that they signed in enlisting or at commissioning.¹²⁹ In other words, the forces that create the profound conditions for the agentic shift within the structure of the military also bind the individual to obedience in a powerful way as they condition the dire social, legal and moral consequences of disobedience.

The immensely powerful psychological and structural manifestation described above effectively describes the way that an individual's willing and moral energy is sequestered within a closed orbit. Similar to the situation of the Nazi killing units – and perhaps simply endemic to military organization in general – Milgram discerns the removal of personal responsibility for actions as a problematic consequence of formal structural authority. In terms of McFadyen's vocabulary, the power of the force of obedience here is that it erects a barrier to a sense of meaning outside the situation. As

captured by the Al-Haqqani network and held for 5 years before he was released in a prisoner swap in which the United States released 5 captives from the Guantanamo Bay Detention facility to authorities in Qatar. The Obama administration faced a great deal of criticism over the exchange, largely due to the prevailing opinion that Bergdahl was a deserter, with the implicit undercurrent that he was therefore not worth saving.

¹²⁹ It is worth noting that the United States military deeply instills in its members the notion that one cannot obey a direct order that is unlawful or immoral. Yet in practice, if one chooses to refuse a direct order, that refusal is likely to result in a court-martial or other disciplinary proceeding during which the burden of demonstrating that said order is immoral or illegal falls on the individual. The default position, in other words, is that the one giving orders is doing so properly. The system then serves to further suppress moral dissent and reinforce obedience as the cost of disobedience remains high.

Milgram argues, the loss of responsibility for one's own actions coincides with an inability for authentic self-reflection and moral self-critique and correction. If none of one's actions emanate from the self, then certainly, the capacity to make meaning of one's actions outside the closed orbit of the situation is virtually nonexistent. Yet willing, is not, of course, inactive. As Milgram himself points out, his subjects often experienced great stress as they performed the task, yet they continued to do so at the urging of the experimenter.

The force of obedience, so potent in the military structure, comprises what is perhaps the most Augustinian feature of distorted willing – the sequestering of the will at a moral level. In McFadyen's terms, the dynamic present in pathological situations confuses our understanding of what is real, of what is right and wrong. The forces that Milgram identifies that are so potent in the US military structure bind the individual members of the military to the psychological notion that to disobey is to incur judgment, guilt, and blame. What is perhaps most salient about Milgram's arguments in conversation with McFadyen's analysis of willing in the Nazi killing units is that the suppression of dissent and sequestration of moral energy in the structures of rigid authority is not limited to governments or societies with a totalitarian grasp. Even in a culture that prides itself on the freedom of ideas and representative access to governing power, the force of obedience restricts the moral horizon of its military members to a profound degree.¹³⁰

Killing and Denial

¹³⁰ In the next chapter, I will explore several cases that demonstrate the inability of military members to resist the force of obedience in the killing of civilians in Vietnam, Korea, Afghanistan and Iraq.

Although military training is designed to condition combatants to kill and to overcome hatred, Grossman has found that the actual act of killing is deeply traumatizing. Recall that the dehumanizing use of slurs and the Pavlovian conditioning that occur in pre-combat training have the effect of essentially short-circuiting the decision-making process – of tricking the mind into thinking that it is *not* killing another person. The produce, in other words, a profound psychological denial and are the two front-line defense mechanisms for the human psyche in combat situations. Grossman argues convincingly, however, that when these denial defense mechanisms fail, the psychic damage can be devastating.¹³¹ The trauma experienced by those who have killed at close range (particularly with stabbing weapons or perhaps even their bare hands) and are confronted with the humanity of the enemy most directly are thus most likely to experience psychic injury, while those who have killed from a great distance (as a bomber pilot dropping ordnance from 10,000 feet) can more easily escape the psychological confrontation. Many soldiers are overwhelmed by guilt, and Grossman chronicles multiple interviews with veterans who described the crushing (and sometimes very gradual) realizations that the people they had killed were, in so many ways, “just like them.”

Once the combatant has killed, the soldier’s unit often functions as a post facto denial defense mechanism. Grossman argues that in many ways, the level of psychic damage the soldier experiences is determined not only by the distance he or she is able to

¹³¹ Grossman does distinguish between the trauma suffered by someone who has killed at extremely close range, and one who has killed at a great distance. The soldier who has had to kill a man with a stabbing weapon, for example, is likely to suffer a far greater trauma than one who has dropped a bomb from an aircraft. The underlying cause, Grossman argues, is that the soldier who kills at close range has a far more difficult time denying the humanity of his enemy than the airman who drops a bomb and never has to witness its results. The level of trauma increases as the killing range decreases (107-137).

achieve between himself and his victim, but the level of social support he receives from the group around him (the inside group) and society at large (the outside group). Part of the strength of a military unit, Grossman argues, is its ability to absolve the specific actions of the individual into the group – guilt and shame, rather than experienced individually are diffused into the group identity.¹³² According to Grossman, the close identification with the cause of the group insulates the individual from direct responsibility and the crushing individuated realization that he himself has killed. In similar fashion, the support veterans receive from the civilian populace can mediate the traumatic experience. Grossman notes that the generally positive reception that World War II veterans received likely had an ameliorating effect on their trauma, while the generally negative reception that Vietnam veterans received likely aggravated theirs.¹³³ The relationship here is complex, as it is not simply a “positive” reception by society that makes a difference, but a positive predisposition that allows for the veteran to explore his experiences in the context of those who care and value him or her enough to allow it.

Yet the veteran’s return home is often a difficult experience, particularly as society at large and the specific groups of family and friends cannot replicate the support and absolution they received from their unit. The denial-defense mechanism of the unit dynamic may continue to provide the psychological benefit of the diffused sense of guilt and shame, even though they may be physically scattered for some time if the vet manages to stay close to the surviving members of the group as time passes. Yet the friends and family closest to him, mirroring forces and trends in society at large, will likely effusively praise their loved one and shower them with expressions of pride and

¹³² Grossman, *On Killing*, 152. This sense of shame and its diffusion resonates with Milgram’s understanding of diffused responsibility through the military hierarchal structure.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 254-257.

gratitude. Unfortunately, this often creates a profound barrier to positive relations as their expressions of pride and valorization of her efforts often contrast starkly with the moral ambiguity and sense of guilt and shame that the veteran who has killed experiences. This contrast and psychological barrier make it significantly more difficult for the veteran to explore his moral ambiguity with those around him and share his experiences and testimony in a healing way with others who may help him bear the moral burdens of guilt and shame. Many veterans thus sink into a difficult psychological isolation, deeply troubled by their own experiences, but unwilling to upset the valorized image others hold of them – perhaps because their valorization is evidence that they do not understand the moral universe of combat and cannot possibly help.

The way the veteran's feelings of guilt and shame bind them to a unit in order to diffuse the sense of responsibility while isolating them in secrecy from larger society bears a remarkable resemblance to McFadyen's analysis of the way a child becomes trapped into isolation and secrecy in situations of abuse. The veteran cannot be fully absolved from the act of killing, as his will is, of course, active; but as I have argued in previous sections, the act itself is conditioned and the combatant's desire distorted by profound forces that act upon the psyche. The combatants view of relationality in general is greatly deformed by the entire process that leads him to kill – the dehumanization and conditioning in training, the forces of hatred that further harden the perception of the "other," and once they have killed, the veteran becomes isolated from healthy relationships and a path to healing through his own guilt and shame.

Chapter 3 – The Dichotomous Experience of Violence: Veterans and American Society

“The Lord said to Cain, ‘Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door’ its desire is for you, but you must master it.’ Cain said to his brother Abel, ‘Let us go out to the field.’ And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him.”

- Genesis 4:6-8 (NRSV)

The first mention of “sin” in Genesis is intimately connected with its narrative of fledgling humanity’s first act of explicit violence: Cain’s murder of Abel. The fall story one chapter earlier certainly describes the initial break with a unified and “righteous” existence with God, but in the primordial narrative, it is violence that becomes the explicit problem that grows out of this condition of broken relation with the divine. God explicitly tells Noah, “I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth.”¹³⁴ Sin and violence share an intimate linkage, but importantly, are not synonymous: violence in the narrative is the primary and most problematic manifestation of the condition of sin. God regrets that humanity’s thoughts are “evil continually,” and ultimately grieves that he created humanity on account of its “wickedness.”¹³⁵ From this evil, wicked (sinful) condition arises the problem that the world has become “filled with violence.” What has gone wrong is most evident in violence that threatens to spiral out of control. For Cain’s murder of Abel, his punishment includes a hard life of toil with the Lord’s guarantee that he will not be harmed else a seven-fold vengeance will befall his attacker. Four generations later people are using the Lord’s promise to Cain to commit

¹³⁴ Genesis 6:13 NRSV.

¹³⁵ Genesis 6:5 NRSV.

violence with seeming impunity: Lamech boasts of his murder of an unnamed “young man” on the basis that he enjoys a similar yet ten-fold greater divine guarantee from harm. It is on account of this increasingly violent wrongness that God vows to “wipe the slate clean” and begin again with Noah and his family.

Far removed from the primordial narrative in Genesis and its direct linkage between sin and violence, in our own American context the meaning of violence is contested in the public sphere.¹³⁶ Where there are a multiplicity of differing positions on (and experiences of) violence in our culture, I will argue here that there are two primary *experiences* of military violence that are radially divergent and form a sharp epistemological dichotomy. First, in the national narrative that is ubiquitous in American politics, culture, and conceptual vocabulary, violence is a force that has been harnessed and yoked in the service of the American enterprise. If this is so, then one could easily argue that the forces of obedience and conditioning that I described in the previous chapter certainly bind the willing of combatants, but do so in the pursuit of a “greater good” that is truly a “good.” The second experience of violence is the experience of those who actually engage in violence on behalf of the nation: its combatants. Their testimonies often exhibit a distinctly different experience that challenges any notion that violence is a domesticated force. The trauma incurred by those who have killed in combat as well as those who experience in varying degrees the psychological torment of the combat environment strongly testifies that violence is pathogenic and toxic with second- and third-order effects that cannot be predicted, let alone controlled. Trauma

¹³⁶ This claim is, of course, linked only to the early narrative in Genesis. Clearly, the scriptures from Genesis to Revelation contain a myriad of axiological positions on violence itself ranging from explicit connection to sin and therefore condemnation to reluctant acceptance to holy act.

testifies that violence serves no particular good, but simply intensifies, distorts and propagates the sinful condition.

Something that is pathological, by definition, is something that exhibits a wrongness, a malformation, an abnormality that is usually related to suffering. Throughout this study, I argue that original sin provides a compelling framework within which to describe how, at its roots, the violence of combat is a potent pathological force that arises from a sinful condition and propagates the condition in a unique way. Trauma is an important indicator that identifies something pathological that has gone profoundly wrong in the fabric of the human experience. While trauma is horrendous, markedly destructive and disfiguring, corrosive and meaning-killing, it is also, in this case, revelatory. It unmask violence as a double-edged sword, an unwieldy thing that damages victim, perpetrator and bystander.

In light of the revelatory aspect of combat trauma, it is my argument that the contestation over the meaning of violence is not one between two truths, but between truth and falsehood. Whereas the veteran experiences violence in an immediate and first-hand manner, the general populace experiences it, if at all, at a great physical and psychological distance. This distance and the comfort it provides (the average citizen does not have to engage with the extreme violence of combat or its distinctive dread and thus avoids them) permit violence to be examined from without and allow its seductive and distorting character to be masked in political and religious ideologies and most powerfully, in the ways those ideologies coalesce into nationalistic narratives.¹³⁷ The experience of trauma unmasks the national narrative as one that is based on a

¹³⁷ It is not my intention here to minimize or diminish the threat of violence that many in our society face daily, but to highlight our loss of memory of the experience of this particular kind of extreme violence.

construction of goodness that is false and illusory. I will argue that an Augustinian conception of the perversion of desire is helpful in unmasking the falsehood of the national narrative of exemplary violence in service to the American enterprise.

American Exceptionalism

An underlying and tacit approval for violence in service to the American enterprise permeates the collective history and culture of American society. In the grand narrative of the United States, military violence is seen as a tool that can be, and indeed has often been, employed in faithful service, both to America's defense and to its larger democratic and civilizing mission. This is not to say that the society is or has ever been univocal in support of military violence, as there have almost always been dissenting voices in times of conflict that opposed military action. Yet the dominant narrative in American culture has been and continues to be that America has been granted a unique position in the world to protect and further democracy and the best aspects of civilization and therefore has a moral duty not only to protect itself and its interests as the bearer of the goods of history and civilization, but to combat uncivilized behavior as a matter of principle. Our country's history has a certain mythos woven into it that reflects these claims – its founding is a narrative of an oppressed people throwing off the yolk of the tyranny of British monarch King George III in the conflict we recognize as the Revolutionary War. The moral mettle of the United States as a whole to withstand the evils of slavery was tested and proven in the crucible of violence that was the Civil War. In World War II, the allies stood up to the horrendous evils of Nazi Germany and imperial Japan and perhaps saved the world from a totalitarian rule. A major thread of

the narrative is that military violence has created a more secure and safe world and protecting the interests and security of the United States of America.

The tacit approval of this narrative is perhaps best evidenced by the public's overwhelming support (at least at the onset of hostilities) for every American conflict in the 20th century and beyond. As polling numbers indicate, initial support for each of the conflicts was extraordinarily high, with public support for World War II initially around a breathtaking 97 per cent of the populace.¹³⁸ The wars in Korea and Iraq both enjoyed an initial public approval rating of around 75 percent, and the post-9/11 war with Afghanistan achieved near-WWII levels of initial support: around 90 per cent. Even during the Vietnam War, a conflict renowned for the strength and radicality of movement against it in the American public, initial public support hovered around 75 per cent.¹³⁹ While support for every conflict since World War II has waned conspicuously as the conflict progresses in a fairly consistent pattern, it is safe to say that whatever causes the American public to sour on any particular conflict does not seem to have a significant impact on support for the next one.

While support for the conflicts tends to wane as time passes, support for the military institution in the public eye does not. As noted in the previous chapter, the military and its members are almost always viewed as the most ethical professionals in

¹³⁸ David W. Moore, "Support for War on Terrorism Rivals Support for WWII," Gallup News Service, posted October 3, 2001, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/4954/support-war-terrorism-rivals-support-wwii.aspx> (accessed August 5, 2015). Gallup did not begin extensive polling until the mid-1930s, so no specific data exists on the public's support of World War I, though it is noteworthy that during World War II, 62% of the public still viewed the first war favorably. Given the general pattern of waning support for a conflict and the obvious (by the 1940s) failure of the Treaty of Versailles to stabilize Europe at that conflict's close, it appears safe to conclude that the public's initial support of the war would be consonant with the general pattern evinced in later 20th century conflicts.

¹³⁹ Ibid. Although pinpointing "the beginning" of the Vietnam conflict is a murky endeavor, for the sake of simplicity, I am referencing a 1965 Gallup poll taken in the immediate aftermath of the arrival in country of the majority of primary American combat force of 184,000 troops.

society and are deeply admired within our culture. Veterans who have served in particular conflicts are valorized and deeply honored in numerous films and stories, in the rhetoric of politicians, and at major sporting events. For the vast majority of the American public, their experience of war is contained in these narratives and these public experiences of swelling pride at the valor and bravery of our veterans.¹⁴⁰ They consume the films and stories and internalize the messages they contain. The language these narratives use convey the sense that America is an exceptional place that is forced to use violence in order to achieve greater levels of civilization and general “good” in the world.

Ideological Underwritings of the Great American Enterprise

The continued support of military endeavors has attained a certain cultural inertia over the history of the United States. As Stanley Hauerwas argues, as a nation that puts considerable stock in proving its cultural and moral mettle in war, each new conflict serves as a way to validate the former conflicts and the national narrative as a whole. Not to engage in conflict or to oppose it when politicians make an appeal to the mission of the United States and the grand democratic, civilizing enterprise would be to dishonor those who have previously fought and sacrificed, and would seemingly risk the collapse of the whole narrative. Based on this, Hauerwas argues, the American system of war and the sacrifice of its heroic combatants “is crucial for the renewal of the moral commitments that constitute our lives.”¹⁴¹ Those who fight in contemporary conflicts do so in part to honor the sacrifices of those who have fought in previous conflicts and to continue to give them meaning. Hauerwas compellingly argues that to break the course of events

¹⁴⁰ Whose valor and bravery I am in no way questioning.

¹⁴¹ Hauerwas, *War and the American Difference*, xv.

would be to undermine the narrative that powerfully undergirds our sense of morality, honor and goodness. The greatest speeches from wartime presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt, Abraham Lincoln and George W. Bush all heavily invoke the honor of the American enterprise through the memory of the cherished past and its brave citizen-soldiers. In reminding the present generation of the sacrifices of those behind them, the leaders are reminding them of their duty to preserve the honor and tradition of their forefathers. The meaning of the enterprise, past, present and future rests upon them and it becomes a moral duty for them to not let the past fall into meaninglessness.

A critical aspect of the cultural experience and consideration of violence is that it is employed in response to political and existential *threat*. The violence of our military saves and safeguards the nation against the dangers posed by these threats, and this redemptive violence is often performed not only on behalf of the United States, but the good of all peoples. The Native Americans and their savagery constituted a threat to the colonists and eventually to civilization at large. The Revolutionary War was fought due to unjust political treatment of the colonists at the hands of the British and the threat of this injustice continuing in perpetuity. The threat of the continued practice of slavery and the dissolution of the United States was met with the violence of the Civil War, which ended slavery and restored the union. The Nazi menace threatened the entire world, and the world was saved by the allied victory. The threat of nuclear annihilation in the cold war was met by our own preparation to annihilate the Soviet Union – an interesting approach known as “Mutually Assured Destruction.” Under the shadowy threat of Islamic terrorism, the War on Terror is justified in order to protect civilian lives and our very political system.

It is instructive that violence, in this narrative, is done in response to the threat that we deeply fear. Rowan Williams argues that the “contemporary fantasy world” of American cinema tells us a great deal about our own attitudes toward fear, violence, and the world outside ourselves. Films, particularly those we go to see in order to experience fear, can be the projections of our deeper views of violence and destruction. Based on an analysis of movie trends, he argues that they convey the unpredictability of “pain and injury and sudden death,” which are always present.¹⁴² In the most notable part of his argument, he makes the powerful claim that the popularity of certain cinematic tropes reveals that against this unpredictable threat, we accept and are willing to commit violence in response “without many qualms about how we do so.”¹⁴³ This unreserved violence is necessitated because it is directed against those who threaten absolutely and essentially and are not “agents like ourselves, whose motives and methods would need scrutiny,” and whose behavior could be predicted and considered.¹⁴⁴ He argues that what is revelatory here is that we view that violence done in response to threat “does not belong in the moral world,” as it has nothing to do with choices and calculated decisions, but is simply a necessity, even a “non-human phenomenon.”¹⁴⁵ Critically, he argues that in these films, violence never originates within the protagonist (within ourselves), but from “the mysterious and uncontrollable world Out There.”¹⁴⁶ In other words, the cinematic trends can be understood to reveal our deep-seated belief that violence resides initially in the “other” and since this other poses such a dreadful threat, we are ready to employ whatever means necessary to annihilate them.

¹⁴² Rowan Williams, *The Truce of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2005), 8.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

Psychological Distance and the Other

This larger national narrative of necessary and redemptive violence is psychologically reinforced both through a subtle and powerful cultural justification as well as a physical and emotional distancing from wartime violence itself.¹⁴⁷ John Tirman argues compellingly that the factors that Williams and Hauerwas mention coalesce into a metanarrative that provides the tacit cultural justification for military violence in *The Deaths of Others: The Fate of Civilians in America's Wars*. Tirman's explicit task is to discover why the American public evidences a profound indifference towards the high number of civilians killed in U.S. conflicts. He finds the apathy expressed "puzzling" in light of the "dominant cultural influence" of Christian ethos and the ubiquity of "Jesus' teachings about compassion" in American society.¹⁴⁸ In answer to this, he argues that the "frontier myth," a deeply embedded cultural narrative of American strength and exceptionalism, holds psychological power to explain this overwhelming public apathy towards the deaths of millions of foreign civilians. At the heart of the frontier myth is the encounter between "civilized" and "civilizing" humanity and "savage" and "natural" humanity – those that come to constitute the ultimate "other." A primary aspect of the power of the frontier myth is that it continually focuses our collective attention to the *problem* and threat posed by this "other," tacitly downplaying or denying any harmful effects from the destruction of the "other." The myth itself effectively imposes a dehumanizing definition of the "other" - this definition in word and in deed, contains the implicit assertion that the "other" is, in critical ways *not like us*. Thus, it not only prevents the public (who receive this communication within the framework of the larger

¹⁴⁷ In truth, a great many forces weave the narrative of American exceptionalism together. I will focus on the two most powerful factors that seem to inhibit critical reflection upon this narrative.

¹⁴⁸ John Tirman, *The Deaths of Others*, 14.

frontier myth) from recognizing even a degree of humanity in the “savage,” but as Tirman later argues, creates an emotional and even ontological distance that prevents the public from viewing their slaughter with any degree of sympathy. It is therefore impossible to view their suffering as a window into the “civilized” human’s own vulnerability.

The primary function of the myth in the American psyche, Tirman argues, is to provide a *de facto* justification for “total war” strategies that result (both intentionally and unintentionally) in large civilian casualties – the deaths of “others.” The primordial fear of the demonic “other” who opposes civilization and threatens the very values that lie at the heart of the American enterprise is a trope evoked continually in American history by its leaders. In the early colonial conflicts with the native Americans, the other is “always the Indian” who is “ever responsible for the savagery” of the conflicts of the era – yet these seemed to often result in the complete extermination of the native American tribe – rarely the other way around.¹⁴⁹ The dehumanization of the native American tribes is evident in both the language used to describe them and the treatment they received. Tirman notes Roger Williams’ description of the Narragansetts in 1675 as “barbarous men of blood who are as justly to be repelled and subdued as wolves that assault the sheep.”¹⁵⁰ The accompanying action demonstrated the “bestial” status the Narragansett people held with the colonists: “a day later, the English raided the tribe and burned down a village and slaughtered everyone, including children.”¹⁵¹ Tirman also notes that “racist, religious and nationalist rationales” for horrendous atrocities were common all the way

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 21.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 23.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

through the North American wars of the 19th century.¹⁵² U.S. militia committed “robbery and rape on [Mexican] mothers and daughters,” and in the civil war, “The confederacy had as a policy the killing of black soldiers no matter what the circumstances. Blacks were killed as prisoners on countless occasions, at times in large-scale massacres.”¹⁵³ This pattern persisted in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries as the U.S. expanded to the Pacific Ocean, continually pacifying the “savage” through conquest. As Tirman notes, “the evil associated with the Indians and the wilderness...was rarely if ever questioned.” The “other” was not encountered in the wilderness as any version of “us.”

With the closure of the American frontier at the turn of the 20th century, by the time the memory of the continental wars had faded and the U.S. found itself involved in conflicts on a more global scale, a new “other” quickly rose to re-enforce the frontier myth: the communist. The “red scare” of the 1950s exhibited a new variety of “othering” than what had occurred previously in the development of the American mythology. First, the advent of nuclear weapons had raised the stakes of the conflict significantly and “the specter of another war, within a few short years of the last world war and compounded by the terror of atomic weapons, both escalated the public’s fear and anger about the communist ‘web.’”¹⁵⁴ Though the phrase had no doubt been uttered thousands of times in order to justify conflicts throughout history, for the first time it could be said in actuality that civilization itself was at stake – both the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. possessed the capability to annihilate the industrialized world in a nuclear holocaust. Second, the since the U.S. and the communist “other” in the Soviet Union were a great physical distance apart, the hunt for the other was turned inward upon

¹⁵² The racist element also appears later in the Arab “other” after 9/11.

¹⁵³ Tirman, *Deaths of Others*, 32, 30.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 67.

American society. For a great multitude of the populace, Tirman argues, “much of U.S. foreign policy was regarded as not merely a fatally weak response to Soviet designs, but weak precisely because American communists were weakening it.”¹⁵⁵ The mysterious and insidious “other” now had to be rooted out of an American society – communism was “a cancer, a disease.”¹⁵⁶ Catholic televangelist Bishop Sheen claimed that communism was “intrinsically evil” – the infamous Joe McCarthy deemed the secret communists “treacherous.”¹⁵⁷

The secret communist “other” looked like an American, appeared to participate in American life and in the building of American society – but at the same time was fundamentally *not like us*. All of the seeming affinities the secret “other” shared with us were merely a facade – the ideological difference presented the “other” with an identity fundamentally different from ours. This secret, evil identity was who they really were. The powerful ideology of the frontier myth and its unwavering American exceptionalism here provide an ability to understand any perceived affinity with an accused communist as false and traitorous to the uncritical goodness of the American enterprise. In essence, even if one’s best friend is a secret communist who is one day exposed (accused) as such, the identity of the “other” has been so firmly established in the collective psyche that one is able to nullify the relationship and encounter as “false” and thereby deny the “other’s” humanity and similarity.

At the turn of the 21st century, the enemy other of course became the Islamic terrorist. What the Tirman’s frontier myth continually provides in its ever-evolving state in American society through its conception of the enemy “other” is essentially a profound

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 64.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 64, 65.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

way to deny that the encounter with the “other” is an encounter with a fellow human being at all. The demonization inherent in the language about the “other” gives them a sub-human status and creates a great emotional distance between the far-away victim and the American living his or her life. It is exemplified in oft-repeated phrases about war that describe how the enemy other “only understands the language of violence,” and “will hate us no matter what we do.” Against such existential threats, there is but one answer: the absolute destruction of that which seeks in its very essence to destroy us. When conflict has been culturally painted in these terms, then the wars America fights are essential conflicts; our enemies are the enemies of civilization, order, and goodness. The violence that we employ against them becomes not only necessary, but perhaps even obligatory when axiological values are cast in these terms. American military action is then continually justified in the name of the singularly unique civilizing enterprise that benefits not only the United States, but the world at large.

The cultural myth of American exceptionalism and redemptive violence that Tirman conceptually explores enjoys a sense of hegemony because of the physical distance of combat, both in our present day reality and in our cultural memory. In *On Killing*, David Grossman argues that the level of trauma associated with extreme violence and most particularly, killing, is inversely proportional to the distance from which the violence is done. The soldier who stabs an enemy to death experiences significantly greater psychological stress than does a bomber pilot who drops his payload from 10,000 feet. The same principle applies to societal views of violence – our physical distance permits us to make meaning of it and to further distance ourselves psychologically. America’s physical distance from battles is fairly obvious: the last time major ground

conflict took place on American soil was in 1865.¹⁵⁸ Directly to Grossman's point, then, none of us witness the reality of combat in our backyards – we do not witness the suffering and death of war close to our homes. Moreover, the experiences of those citizens who did is now lost to our collective cultural memory, as the very last of these citizens died over 50 years ago. While many veterans carry the weight of combat experience, the distant nature of those events allows the greater public to compartmentalize it – they can accept combat violence without imagining it spilling over into their homes, taking the lives of their sons and daughters. The loss of the personal and cultural memory of battlefield violence leaves little experiential weight to provide a counter-balance to the historical, social and ideological forces that seek to define violence through a greater national narrative.

Combat Trauma and the Disintegration of the National Narrative

Soldiers, of course, experience violence not at a physical or psychological distance, but as an imminent physical and psychological reality that defines their experience of the world in the combat zone. The violence they encounter resonates deeply in the psyche and those who deal with it in the most acute ways – directly killing the enemy at close range – often experience immediate trauma, revulsion and guilt. In light of the visceral reality of killing and the experienced reality of life in a combat zone, the carefully constructed, conditioned, and rationalized frameworks of meaning that are meant to carry the psychological heft of participation in conflict often immediately collapse. Those who participate in killing in a less direct manner may experience a

¹⁵⁸ I use the qualifier “major” here in recognition of the “Indian Wars” that persisted into the late 19th century.

slower breakdown of the framework and experience a more diffuse moral ambiguity. Yet the sheer number of veterans who experience significant psychological injury suggests that few who experience the reality of killing and wartime violence walk away physically and psychologically “unscathed.”¹⁵⁹

The Burden of Responsibility and the Impact of Killing

Their proximity to violence means that combatants encounter it in a direct, immediate and visceral way. The soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines that are the implements of American policy actively flip the switches, push the buttons and pull the triggers that launch bombs, missiles and bullets at the enemy. They witness the enemy buildings exploding and the bodies torn apart by bombs and bullets. They see the blood and carnage that results and they hear the accompanying human reactions – screams of terror, pain, agony and loss. In short, they witness the results of their own violent actions. Of course, those involved in intense combat also experience the impact of violence against them: the wounds and death to their comrades that accompany enemy improvised explosive devices, bullets and bombs. The extremely stressful nature of these experiences of death, pain and fear trigger profound physiological responses in the body. The endocrine system floods the body with adrenaline, and the combatant experiences what many of us do in stressful situations – increased heartrate, rapid breathing, a feeling of increased awareness and mental acuity, etc. Yet the extreme, life-or-death nature of

¹⁵⁹ This is not to say that there are no “positive” psychological phenomena that surround the military and the combat environment. Certainly, combatants often find themselves bonded together in a brotherhood that becomes a source of life-long fulfillment. There can be a sense of accomplishment and achievement in attaining rank, certifications and status. Yet as evidenced by the number of cases of PTSD and the current rate of veteran suicide (22 per day), it is apparent that these psychological benefits are predominantly outweighed by the traumatic damage experienced in combat.

these experiences triggers a more significant “fight or flight” response in which every bit of energy is made available towards the goal of survival. Grossman describes the severity of the process that often shuts down “nonessential activities such as digestion, bladder control, and sphincter control” and causes uncontrolled “stress diarrhea” and urination.¹⁶⁰ After the threat has passed, the body essentially experiences an adrenaline backlash as the “neglected demands” of the other bodily functions assert themselves. The combatant feels an immense exhaustion and weariness.

While the human body is able to adapt to survive in this way, continuous and repeated cycles of exposure to this level of existential stress are debilitating to both the mind and body. In particular, it appears that human beings simply are not psychologically equipped to handle the stresses of battle for long periods of time. In a study of World War II soldiers, neurologists Roy Swank and Walter Marchand concluded that “after 60 days of continuous combat, 98 percent of all surviving soldiers become psychiatric casualties of one kind or another.”¹⁶¹ More recent studies have revealed that “excessive arousal” and periods of extreme adrenaline rushes and subsequent crashes can “promote physical damage to certain neurons in the brain,” with the result that the tissue of the brain can actually degenerate, affecting the mind’s ability to make effective decisions in even mundane situations and its ability to properly process memories.¹⁶² The survival mechanism of arousal in response to threat becomes literally toxic to the body. Grossman notes that with increasing advances in technology, weaponry and logistics, we

¹⁶⁰ Grossman, *On Killing*, 70.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 43-44. The remaining 2 per cent are what we would identify now as “sociopathic” personalities that physically have no capacity for empathy.

¹⁶² William P. Nash, “Combat/Operational Stress Adaptations and Injuries” in *Combat Stress Injury: Theory, Research, and Management*, Eds. Charles R. Figley and William P. Nash (New York: Routledge, 2007), 53.

have completely outpaced our physiological ability to handle the accompanying stress. Military historian Richard Gabriel similarly notes that “we have reached a point where almost everyone exposed to combat will, within a comparatively short period of time, be killed, wounded or driven mad.”¹⁶³ The psychological stress of conflict, despite the rise of distanced or “stand-off” weapons, continues to increase with the increased lethality of modern combat, as combatants are repeatedly exposed to situations of intense stress and arousal for longer periods of time.

In addition to the physiological-psychological stresses of contemporary warfare, the combatant experiences a psychological stress that manifests itself in moral terms. As I noted earlier, Army psychologist Lt. Col. David Grossman argues that within each human being there is a deep-seated psychological injunction against killing his or her fellow human beings, particularly at close range. When, as a result of careful conditioning and training processes, one overcomes the injunction and kills another, Grossman argues that significant psychological consequences are experienced almost immediately. While some combatants do experience the triumphant exuberance one would expect from the national narrative, numerous interviews with front-line soldiers in various conflicts attest to the immediate sense of guilt and regret that often accompanies the act of killing.¹⁶⁴ A British World War I veteran who had just killed his first enemy soldier testified, “when things quieted down I went and looked at a German I knew I had shot. I remember thinking that he looked old enough to have a family and I felt very

¹⁶³ Richard Gabriel, *No More Heroes: Madness and Psychiatry in War* (New York: Hill and Wang Publishers, 1987), 43-44.

¹⁶⁴ Grossman, *On Killing*, 235. Grossman argues that even in those soldiers that experience “the thrill of killing,” the overwhelming majority of those who kill, particularly at close range, move to a response stage of remorse after the euphoria is gone and the war ends. Those who continue to truly never move into a state of remorse after killing at close range he categorizes as the 2 per cent who are immune to psychiatric casualty in combat because they are sociopathic and physically lack the capacity for empathy.

sorry.”¹⁶⁵ A U.S. Army Special Forces veteran describes an episode in Vietnam in which he encountered a young combatant:

And I froze, ‘cos it was a boy, I would say between the ages of twelve and fourteen. When he turned at me and looked, all of a sudden he turned his whole body and pointed his automatic weapon at me, I just opened up, fired the whole twenty rounds right at the kid, and he just laid there. I dropped my weapon and cried.¹⁶⁶

The immediate sense of revulsion is often expressed viscerally and physiologically – numerous veterans articulate how they immediately vomited moments after killing an enemy. These reactions testify to the horror of the act of killing itself and to the difficulty that even the most highly trained military member has in participating in it.

According to Grossman, much of combat conditioning comes from training the combatant receives in short-circuiting the injunction against killing and temporarily obscuring the action of killing from the psyche. As previously noted, militaries developed their dehumanizing and Pavlovian conditioning techniques as a result of studies that showed that as late as World War II, as many as 80-85 percent of front-line combatants were refusing to fire their weapon at the enemy even when engaged in direct combat. As the military began to understand the “problem” and conceived and implemented new conditioning techniques to increase the percentage of firers, the firing rate in Vietnam rose to around 95 per cent – an effect that Grossman describes as the psychological equivalent of “taking off the safety catch.”¹⁶⁷ Corresponding to this increased firing rate, Vietnam veterans have a spectacularly high rate of psychiatric casualties.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 88.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., xv.

Jonathan Shay, a psychiatrist working with veterans in Boston notes that over 70 per cent of Vietnam combat veterans have “experienced at least one of the cardinal symptoms” of PTSD at some point in their lives.¹⁶⁸ While Grossman acknowledges a variety of factors that contribute to the rate of PTSD in Vietnam vets (the prevalence of child soldiers trained by the Viet Cong, the presence of psychotropic drugs in American units and the lack of public support for the conflict), in the end the denial defense mechanisms that were set up to rationalize the killing or protect the psyche of the combatant from the realization that he had killed systematically failed in this particular conflict. Despite the dehumanization of the enemy, when the combatant experienced killing with the intimacy that it often occurred in the jungles of Vietnam, the realization that the enemy was “just like me” created significant psychological problems. With so many more combatants engaged in direct combat, it remains highly likely that the primary cause of this high rate of PTSD is that many more combatants were forced to struggle with the crushing guilt and shame of killing amidst the failure of the denial defense mechanisms that are built into the military system.

¹⁶⁸ Jonathan Shay, *Achilles In Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York: Scribner Press, 1994), 168. It is difficult to compare specific rates of PTSD as it is currently recognized in Vietnam Veterans and “psychiatric casualties” as classified by the military prior to the official inclusion of PTSD in the DSM-III in 1980. Grossman presents figures that indicate that as many as 504,000 American men fighting in World War II suffered from psychiatric collapse and that the rate of this malady was such that at one point during the war, the number of soldiers being discharged as psychiatric casualties exceeded the number of new recruits being drafted in. The huge number of American combatants in World War II (over 16 million) and the difficulty in discerning the percentage of those participating in direct combat make coming up with a percentage to compare to Shay’s statistic concerning combat veterans in Vietnam an exercise in futility. Yet nearly any rough comparison performed on the WWII numbers would seem to yield a psychiatric casualty rate well below Shay’s figure of 70 per cent for Vietnam veterans. Granted, this may be attributed to an increasing understanding of the ways that PTSD presents itself, increased long-term oversight of veterans facing difficulty and other societal changes. Yet nearly all psychologists and psychiatrists note a marked increase in cases of psychiatric distress in Vietnam veterans as compared to previous conflicts.

Yet as Grossman also notes, it is not simply the act of killing that is traumatizing, but the experience of violence in its many forms on the battlefield. The witness itself to the direct effects of violence – the suffering of those, both enemy and compatriot, who have been grievously wounded; the reactions of civilians to the deaths of their loved ones; the very sight of bodies and body parts disfigured by bombs – proves to be deeply troubling to the psyche. As psychologist Edward Tick argues, the psyche has trouble handling the encounter with death and so “we do our best to numb ourselves to the reality that they are human beings, whether or not we have been the agent of their deaths.”¹⁶⁹ The psyche has difficulty processing destruction and carnage on the scale it is often encountered in modern combat, where the lethality of weaponry and the very nature of “area weapons” that destroy everything within a certain sphere frequently produce unintended civilian casualties. The combatant is increasingly likely to witness the often unintended victims of warfare and to struggle with the moral implications of one’s own worldview as a result. Iraqi veteran and U.S. Navy psychiatrist William Nash describes this sort of stress injury as a kind of damage to one’s “core beliefs.”¹⁷⁰ He argues that everyone, out of necessity, has their own set of “core assumptions about the world and one’s place in it” that guide their interpretations of their own experiences and their decision-making. All people, he argues, have a basic need to “believe that they are safe – that their lives will not be snuffed out in the next few seconds – and that a moral order

¹⁶⁹ Edward Tick, *War and the Soul: Healing our Nation’s Veterans From Post-traumatic Stress Disorder* (Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 2005), 103.

¹⁷⁰ Nash, “Combat/Operational Stress Adaptations and Injuries,” 53.

exists in the universe that discriminates right from wrong.”¹⁷¹ Both the sense of relative safety and the notion of moral order are violated and betrayed by the swift and sudden deaths of non-combatants – the combatant can experience an immediate and intense sense of vulnerability and strong notion of injustice, particularly when the side one is fighting for causes the damage.¹⁷² Noting the unique way in which young combatants often have to deal with death in this manner, Nash argues that the “death imprint,” or the “radical intrusion” of the reality of death in their lives, is extremely difficult to process and to, in his words “detoxify.”¹⁷³

Combatants processing this “death imprint” struggle to retain a sense of meaningful self and moral order against the forces that seek to redefine both his self and morality. As I have argued at length in the previous chapter, the willing of combatants is deeply impacted by the demands of authority, training and obedience. Those who study PTSD note also that what war at its most basic forces its combatants to do is to think in stark terms about humanity and moral order. Tick notes that it “demands that we love some of our neighbors and destroy others. And it asks us to align ourselves – to love and hate thus – in the most uncompromising terms.”¹⁷⁴ In light of this, Tick argues further, war inverts many aspects of morality: rather than viewed as a reprehensible crime, the killing

¹⁷¹ Nash, “Combat/Operational Stress Adaptations and Injuries,” 53.

¹⁷² In my own experience as a Special Operations Weather Team commander in Afghanistan, one of the most haunting and enduring memories I have is that of an 8-year old Afghan boy who immediately lost both legs and subsequently died after stepping on a landmine just outside the walls of Bagram Air Base while playing. In another incident, while I was not physically on the ground to witness it, during my time in Afghanistan, a funeral was targeted by the coalition forces and attacked with a Predator drone, resulting in significant non-combatant casualties.

¹⁷³ Nash, “Combat/Operational Stress Adaptations and Injuries,” 53.

¹⁷⁴ Tick, *War and the Soul*, 119.

of the enemy is a moral good. To those we are supposed to hate, kindness and compassion are weakness and, in the extreme, treachery and betrayal. The experience of violence re-wires the morality of its combatants, and in doing so, creates great amounts of confusion, particularly when one is asked to re-enter the world in which killing is considered “bad” and compassion and kindness again considered “good.”

Perhaps the most insidious form of moral disquiet that occurs in combatants is the feeling of shame at suffering from forms of traumatic disorder at all – from not being “strong enough” to “deal with it” and move on with their lives. Nash notes that while civilians experience degrees of shame following traumatic experiences, the feeling of shame in veterans is perhaps unique. Each member of today’s military serves because they have volunteered – there are no conscripts or draftees. Therefore, when they experience difficulty in adapting to the moral environment of the battlefield, when they experience guilt as they perform their duty and kill the enemy, when they experience profound moral ambiguity and difficulty in the return to civilian life, they are ashamed at their inability to simply “triumph over it.”¹⁷⁵ They volunteered, Nash argues, “knowing they would face the challenges of war,” and experience a profound sense of failure when they are unable to meet those challenges successfully in the combat zone and transition easily back to civilian life.

In consideration of the profound ways in which violence in conflict shatters elements of personal identity as well as how combatants often describe

¹⁷⁵ Nash, “Combat/Operational Stress Adaptations and Injuries,” 53.

their experiences in distinctly axiological terms, several recent researchers have argued that PTSD should not be classified simply as a stress disorder. Shay began to use the term “moral injury” precisely to address the aspects of experienced violence that were distinct from physiological damage. It casts a much more direct focus on the experience of guilt and shame and attempts to encompass more holistically the aspects of personal morality and identity that are surely related to stress, though not exhaustively caused by an adverse reaction to that stress. In similar fashion, Tick has argued that PTSD is often not a stress injury, but an identity disorder. He argues that societal conditioning and military training build an identity for the combatant that breaks during the encounter with violence, yet neither the military nor society at large assists them in rebuilding or reforming their identity in positive or meaningful ways. Given this, veterans struggle mightily with the task that Nash argues accompanies their return: to “construct new belief systems that transcend the old and incorporate, somehow, the brutal realities of war without sacrificing everything that is positive about human existence.”¹⁷⁶

The Effects of PTSD and the Distorting Spread of Violence

Veterans returning from conflicts experience a number of detrimental effects from their engagement with wartime violence. Some of these effects stem from particular physiological injuries sustained in the combat environment and others appear to result from the intense moral dilemmas in which veterans often find themselves. Both cases

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 54.

draw attention to the profound effect of intense violence in re-shaping the way the veteran both physiologically and psychologically processes the events around them, as well as their own needs and desires. While the effects are felt most profoundly by the veteran who suffers them directly, many of the behavioral issues that stem or result directly from PTSD affect the families, colleagues, co-workers and friends of the veteran. The violence of the combat zone is, in this indirect way, brought home and experienced by those who come to know it through its distortion in the life of the veteran. In his two studies, *Achilles in Vietnam* and *Odysseus in America*, Shay draws upon the titular mythic warriors as archetypes because they are complex and nuanced characters, who have experienced deep and profound trauma, but perhaps more critically, because they both, in sometimes shocking ways, brought the violence of war back to their homes with them. The difficulties veterans have in returning home often alienate them from loved ones, make relationships with friends difficult, and cause difficulties with employers – each effect further isolating the veteran and often intensifying their psychological struggles.

Like many civilians who suffer from PTSD, veterans are prone to experience the “return” of their most traumatic experiences, in which the unassimilated memory¹⁷⁷ of the

¹⁷⁷ While there are varying theories that attempt to explain how “the return” is experienced so strongly in traumatized persons, most seem to hold that the brain’s process of making and storing memories somehow fails in the face of extreme stress. Some argue that the experience of trauma floods the system with so much information that it essentially “floats about the mind” instead of being time-date stamped and filed as past experience. Others argue that in such intensely stressful situations, the reptilian brain essentially takes over and actions are taken based on non-verbal cues and perceptions rather than rational decisions. Therefore, the memory is stored in visceral terms – smells, sights, sounds and emotions. The memory is thus inaccessible to conscious, verbal thoughts and is intensely aroused by sights, smells and sounds that may trigger it.

event is brought to the fore of the mind.¹⁷⁸ The veteran, in their own mind, is re-living the experience as though it is happening in the present, with many of the corresponding physiological reactions: adrenaline surge, elevated heart rate, increased arousal and intense sweating.¹⁷⁹ They also re-live the emotions of the experience: fear, anxiety, stress and even intense feelings of guilt and shame may come flooding back as the unassimilated memory overwhelms the nervous system. In veterans, the experience of intense hyperarousal, which often occurs in particularly violent “berserk” state in combat can also be re-experienced via an “adrenaline storm.”¹⁸⁰ The experience of these storms reflects a “permanent imprint” left on the physiology of the combatant, and when they occur, the veteran suffers from all the affects described above, along with an accompanying sense of overwhelming rage.

In the light of repeated experiences of extreme violence and death, veterans often feel as though they have lost all agency. As Serene Jones notes in *Trauma and Grace*, this sense of a lack of agency is common among many civilian trauma survivors as well, who “lose confidence that they are effective actors in the world.”¹⁸¹ She articulates that this failure of agency is based in a feeling of extreme passivity during the traumatic event and a sense, based on this passivity, that their own agency is meaningless. Though combatants carry weapons, execute detailed missions and witness and examine the results of their actions in combat, many of them experience significant feelings of passivity. They may see themselves as pawns in a larger scheme of violence during their own

¹⁷⁸My comment about civilians with PTSD is in no way to mark them out as “lesser sufferers” of the disorder, merely to mark the common ground of traumatic effect from which I will discuss the particularities of the combat variety of PTSD.

¹⁷⁹ Jonathan Shay, *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming* (New York: Scribner, 2002), 24.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Serene Jones, *Trauma + Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 17.

traumatic events. Shay argues that warfare is a form of “captivity” for those who participate in it, noting in resonance with McFadyen and Milgram that the sense of responsibility and even agency is often located far from the front-line combatants who follow the orders of their tactical and operational commanders. Shay also argues that in the face of their own government, veterans experience a feeling of “powerlessness,” the result of which is that they are “liable to be eaten alive” and completely lose their meaningful identity in the bureaucracy that is “blind to how things interconnect.”¹⁸² They experience an objectification that threatens to become absolute. In this same vein, Tick argues that PTSD should not be classified as a stress disorder, but as an “identity disorder,” in which one’s own sense of agency has become unmoored from meaningful activity.

Attempting to recapture some sense of effective action, many veterans become “mission-focused,” fixated on a particular task or goal to the complete disregard of any other demands or responsibilities. Shay observes that many veterans work long hours, far in excess of the standard forty hours a week, yet have virtually no regard for the money they earn doing it. Instead, he argues that their workaholic tendency is due to the need to take on a “mission,” in order to both recover a singular sense of motivation as well as to block out everything else from their minds. Shay notes that this method of avoidance of unresolved traumatic events often becomes so important in veterans that what eventually triggers a “breakdown” for them is the imposition of an external event that prevents “the veteran from keeping the workaholic schedule he had followed.”¹⁸³ Shay intimates that the veteran who cannot find consistent work and the workaholic veteran share a mission-

¹⁸² Shay, *Odysseus in America*, 47.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 58.

focused mentality; the latter is simply able, either by circumstance or effort, to translate his military mentality to his employment, while the former cannot find a job that affords him the same singular focus to which he or she has become accustomed. Family life for these veterans suffers greatly, of course, as they spend nearly all of their available time and energy at work, religiously avoiding other commitments.

Families often suffer the most from the violence that veterans bring home from war, both in terms of physical danger as well as broken relationships. Studies of veterans from the Vietnam war onward estimate that combat veterans account for 21 per cent of all cases of domestic violence in the United States, while comprising a fraction of one per cent of the population.¹⁸⁴ Given the training of many combatants, these incidents of domestic violence can be particularly dangerous when paired with severe cases of PTSD. In perhaps the most tragic example, in 2002, three Army Special Operations soldiers stationed at Fort Bragg, North Carolina returned from Afghanistan and killed their wives within a period of 6 weeks, prompting the Army to radically re-examine its family counseling program. Violence is so likely to spread in varying intensities from a veteran to their spouse or partner that the phenomenon of “secondary traumatization” is being studied, with wives of combat veterans as “indirect victims of their husbands’ traumatic experience.”¹⁸⁵

Observing the intense way that many returning veterans with PTSD appear to exhibit tendencies towards domestic violence, several researchers have argued that

¹⁸⁴ Holly G. Prigerson, Paul K. Maciejewski and Robert . Rosenheck, “Population Attributable Fractions of Psychiatric Disorders and Behavioral Outcomes Associated With Combat Exposure Among US Men,” *American Journal of Public Health* 92, no. 1 (January 2002), 59.

¹⁸⁵ Rrachel Dekel and Zahava Solomon, “Secondary Traumatization Among Wives of War Veterans with PTSD” in *Combat Stress Injury: Theory, Research and Management*, Eds. Charles Figley and William Nash (New York: Routledge, 2007), 137.

combat situations often inculcate a sense of misogyny. Noting Homer's trope of dangerous, wily and seductive women in the *Odyssey*, Shay argues that many soldiers in Vietnam experienced sex for the first time with Vietnamese prostitutes. These encounters took place amongst a backdrop of mistrust. The suspicion that the prostituted women were Viet Cong agents who would harm the soldiers if they could was widespread, and the soldiers' experiences of intimacy were colored by this deep mistrust of their sexual partners. This inculcated a "visceral sense that women are dangerous," Shay argues, and this coincided with significant instances of violence towards the Vietnamese prostitutes that for political reasons were almost never investigated by U.S. or South Vietnamese authorities.¹⁸⁶ Sex, sought after as welcome intimacy and connection amidst the harsh and unforgiving combat environment, thus becomes mingled with the idea that partners cannot be trusted and that violence against them is often warranted (and never consequential).

Ed Tick argues that the experience of combat actually alters the combatant's relation to love and sexuality. He argues that the experience of killing and sexual release can become tightly intertwined, noting that "innumerable descriptions of wartime killing sound like acts of love or sex."¹⁸⁷ The release of rounds from a rifle directed at an enemy becomes like an "orgasmic discharge" in the intense stresses of life and death situations. He describes numerous veterans who were unable to be intimate with their partners without the sight of exposed flesh triggering images of death and destruction. The Department of Veteran's Affairs has actually created a specific program around Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) in the wake of repeated instances of sexual violence that would

¹⁸⁶ Shay, *Odysseus in America*, 70.

¹⁸⁷ Tick, *War and the Soul*, 125.

appear to be deeply consonant with Tick's conception. In a similar vein, Tick argues further that the repeated exposure to death and dead bodies may inculcate a desperate need in the combatant to feel life and the "human touch" in a compulsive way. Returning veterans may thus end up deeply unsatisfied with the sexuality they express with their wives or partners and attempt to fulfill their needs with other women. This often leads to deep feelings of betrayal, shame, guilt, anger and resentment on the part of the partners of veterans and strained and broken familial relationships. Intimately aware of the hurt they have caused as well as the myriad ways in which they are now seemingly irreconcilably different from their loved ones, veterans are often filled with shame at the brokenness they seem to propagate amongst their family members and often sink into a physical and psychological isolation from others.

The Collapse of Moral Frameworks

In the crucible of the physical, axiological and psychological forces of combat, what becomes clear is that the moral framework that often supported the combatant prior to conflict collapses under the weight of the experience of wartime violence. In its simplest and most basic construction, the act of killing that is experienced arouses moral conflict with the values instilled in the combatant in training. As Grossman points out, the enemy is systematically dehumanized in the combatant's training to numb him to the fact that the enemy is a human being. The guilt and shame experienced by front-line ground combatants appears to have a direct correlation with the realization that this framework is essentially false, as the enemy appears at close inspection to be "just like" them. Yet these experiences as well as other encounters with the violence of modern

combat cause the veteran not simply to reject this singular principle, but their general moral ordering of right and wrong, goodness and evil. The expression “the first casualty of war is innocence” has become so prevalent that it is a cliché, and it’s clichéd status masks the truth it tells: that the loss of one’s moral footing and the framework which gives actions meaning is deeply disorienting and damaging.¹⁸⁸

The loss of innocence is particularly disorienting in a culture that so stringently identifies itself as innocent and is therefore devastating to a combatant’s sense of identity and self. Tick argues that America “claims innocence and goodness as fundamental traits,” so much so that we expect men and women to be able to train to be fierce warriors, go off to war and “get the job done” and then return without consequence, “blameless and well.”¹⁸⁹ The presence of guilt, shame and other degreed variations of moral ambiguity that many combatants experience intensely in combat not only shatter the narrative of their own personal innocence, but the notion of national innocence as well. Tick argues that soldiers actually often discover the opposite of their own cultural belief – that they are perceived in the foreign land as the “bad guy,” so much so that “those we are trying to save see us as the savage invaders, needing to be stopped by their own painful, heroic sacrifices.”¹⁹⁰ What Nash describes as a category of “damage to core beliefs” about one’s own innocence and the validity of one’s cause, Tick recognizes as the destruction of one’s very identity, as it “destroys one’s ability to participate in the

¹⁸⁸ This expression was the tagline for the 1986 Oliver Stone film *Platoon*, which portrayed the horrors of combat within an American infantry platoon in the Vietnam war. It is an alteration of U.S. senator Hiram Johnson’s 1917 quote that “The first casualty of war is the truth,” which is a paraphrase of Aeschylus 5th century B.C.E. quote “In war, truth is the first casualty.” In the context of the loss of the moral framework provided by the American exceptionalism narrative, both variations would seem to have merit.

¹⁸⁹ Tick, *War and the Soul*, 155.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 160.

culture's mystique of goodness and its forward propulsion at war's end."¹⁹¹ Shay, too, recognizes that those suffering from "complex PTSD" are suffering from a betrayal of what they understood to be true and right. For him, the damaging situations that occur in combat have the capacity to "undo character" and send it spiraling in varying directions in search of anchoring meaning.¹⁹²

Tick evocatively draws upon the Greek narrative of the affair of Ares and Aphrodite in order to illustrate the power of social constructions of morality and their relationship to the lived experience of violence. Aphrodite, he argues, represents to us "tenderness, beauty and feminine receptiveness," while Ares on his own is "sheer rage and rampage."¹⁹³ Absent a guiding narrative that attempts to give it greater meaning, war is simply slaughter and death, but joined together in grander terms, it "gains grace, beauty, and nobility."¹⁹⁴ We go to war with the grand visions of honor and nobility in mind and make passionate cases to do so, and yet the true experience of conflict is rarely other than what Ares is alone – slaughter, death and hatred. Tick argues that the failure of this myth and cultural expectation about conflict is deeply connected to veteran suffering, arguing that, "PTSD is the expression of the anguish, dislocation and rage of the self as it attempts to cope with its loss of innocence, reformulate a new personal identity and cultural role, and awaken from massive denial."¹⁹⁵ In denying our own capacities for violence, and placing "evil" far away from ourselves and in "other people

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 157.

¹⁹² Shay marks a distinction between "simple PTSD" and "complex PTSD." Simple PTSD is what I've essentially noted as physiological damage, such as what happens to the central nervous system through repeated hyperarousal. Complex PTSD has a distinctive moral element to it – a betrayal of what Shay deems "Social Trust," which is the understanding that power will be used responsibly to do what is right.

¹⁹³ Tick, *War and the Soul*, 121.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 170.

and their systems,” Tick argues that we deny that warfare is really Ares alone; it is death and slaughter.

In their work with veterans, both Tick and Shay focus on ways to reform combatant identities with an emphasis on bearing witness to the truth about the violence of conflict. Both decry the lack of rituals of purification and cleansing in our culture that recognize that veterans cannot simply re-integrate into society and which implicitly and explicitly acknowledge the traumatizing nature of violence suffered. Shay describes the intentional creation of a veterans’ group at the VA in which they can witness to their own trauma, be heard, supported and essentially “reborn” having been “cleansed” of the war.¹⁹⁶ Tick works to develop what he terms an identity based on the attainment of a tribal elder-like “warrior status,” which involves (among other things) the bearing of the truth of the nature of violence and conflict and the somewhat sacred duty to testify to this reality in the larger societal conversation.

More directly than other researchers, Tick argues that society at large and its addiction to a false narrative must bear a great deal of the responsibility for PTSD and the conditions under which veterans suffer it. He argues that the “severity and extent to which veterans suffer with PTSD is in direct response to our culture’s blindness about war’s true cost.”¹⁹⁷ In order to cling to our own mythical foundations and cultural beliefs about innocence, we deny war’s destructiveness and the corrupting nature of violence itself. Critically, he argues that society turns a blind eye to the reality of war in a particular way, rejecting the notion that it “changes its participants forever” and rather treating veterans and their profound axiological suffering as something that can easily be

¹⁹⁶ Shay, *Odysseus in America*, 169.

¹⁹⁷ Tick, *War and the Soul*, 169.

“repaired.”¹⁹⁸ Just as restoration of a veteran involves, in his view, the restoration of moral fiber that is able to come to terms with his encounter with violence, Tick argues that PTSD is a problem of societal morality. He is concerned that in its “addiction to security,” America has become unable to take responsibility for the violence of its wars and perhaps more critically for its “war making tendencies.”¹⁹⁹ Taking responsibility, of course, entails that there is a shared burden of responsibility for the results of conflict and this necessarily entails the renunciation of our mythic sense of innocence. The veteran is isolated in the absence of the communal, national responsibility, Tick argues, and becomes a scapegoat that “carries [the nation’s] secret grief and guilt for all of us.”²⁰⁰

Synthesis – Re-Framing Violence and Moral Order

The veteran’s traumatic and damaging encounter with violence challenges the veracity of the narrative of American exceptionalism in two major areas: its conception of our national innocence and goodness, and the understanding that violence can be used cleanly in service to the larger good of the American enterprise. The distortions veterans bear within themselves shatter the notion that we can both view ourselves as innocent and unquestionably good *and* use violence to maintain that innocence and goodness or to further it in the world. They deny the redemptive role that violence plays in the American narrative, and, perhaps more fundamentally and critically, they call into question our sense of our own identity and our capacity for honest moral reflection. If we are a “good” and “innocent” people, then violence is not something that we find within ourselves, but something that invades from without, that must be controlled and kept at

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 155.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 237.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

bay. In Girardian terms, our views of violence and its necessity inform our social construction of “good” violence: that which is done in order to keep the external “evil” violence from spreading uncontrollably through the good and civilized world. Resonant with the experience of many veterans, however, Girard notes that this distinction is ultimately inconsequential – more violence is done in the name of ending violence, and violence ultimately is the victor as it cannot be mastered. The high number of civilian casualties of American wars and the increasing number of morally traumatized veterans call into question our belief in our national innocence as well as the goodness of our violence.

In light of this, the rest of this chapter will explore the ways the doctrine of sin can inform our identity and moral order in a way that allows us to soberly view our own capacity for violence. One of the primary issues inhibiting this authentic understanding in our own society is our acceptance of tribal, national boundaries as an unequivocal and necessary “good.” Augustine’s discussion of “inordinate love” provides a framework from which we can understand national identity and security to be proper goods, but only when understood as penultimate goods in rightful competition and balance with other goods. Additionally, Augustine’s presentation of the fall of the angels (which precedes that of Adam) as the dissolution of unified creaturely integrity provides valuable insight into the way tribalism and violence rend the common good of all humanity. This conception allows us to understand violence as a direct assault on the integrity of both collective and individual human nature. While I will explore the consequences of this assault on the psyche of the combatant in the following two chapters, in this section I will argue that Augustine’s conception provides a pivotal framework from which we can

construct a more authentic moral order that is attentive to the realities of violence and that provides a way to critique American exceptionalism and essentialized moral categories.

Augustine and The Perversion and Sequestration of Good

Augustine argues that a primary result of the fall is humanity's alienation from that which is truly good and its elevation of more temporal goods to an ultimate status. The world is composed of many things that are good in themselves: beauty, gold, even a sense of pride. He goes to great lengths to argue that these things are not evil in and of themselves, but as a part of creation are, by their nature, good.²⁰¹ Yet disconnected from the One who is truly good and who provides the framework within which these other goods can be adequately appreciated, the human will "inordinately desires" them to the detriment of the good order.²⁰² For example, he argues that greed is "not the fault of gold, but of the man who loves gold perversely, and who therefore neglects righteousness, which ought to be held in incomparably higher esteem than gold."²⁰³ The perversion of desires leads, as he notes in the case of greed, to the abandonment of other goods, and this disturbs and damages the order of the whole. Perverse love elevates one good to the detriment of all others and makes the lover himself evil, for even as he attains what he desires, he is "made wretched because deprived of a greater good."²⁰⁴

There is also a sense in Augustine's descriptions of good natures and perverse love that the common good of creation as a whole is damaged by the turn to the self as

²⁰¹ This is more or less the main thrust of book 12 of the *City of God* – demonstrating that it is the turning of the will to that which is inferior which is evil itself. He is concerned here to maintain the goodness of creation on its own merits and in its proper order and to argue that evil is insubstantial – it is not that which is opposed to that which is good, but that which corrupts it. Almost akin to a virus, evil cannot exist for Augustine apart from that which is, by its nature, good.

²⁰² Augustine, *City of God*, 12.8.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

ultimate good. In the discussion of the fall of the angels, he argues that those who fell, “delighting in their own power,” fell from “that higher and blessed good which was common to them all and embraced a private good of their own.”²⁰⁵ The contrast of the “private” good of the fallen angels who look to themselves for fulfillment and the “common good” of those who cleave to God suggests the shattering of a whole into self-interest as a primary motif for sinfulness. The fall, understood in this way as a turn to the self, fractures the very commonality of the community, and Augustine contrasts the “zeal for selfish ends” of the fallen angels with the “uniting force of love” of those who remain blessed in communion with God.²⁰⁶ Blessedness is only caused by the unifying force of love in communion with and commonality of God, while those who have departed this communion for their own ends are miserable. Alienated from that which satisfies, the fallen exist in misery. In seeking satisfaction from their own ends, in preferring “vanity to truth” and individuality over community, they become false. The individual angel cannot achieve satisfaction apart from the community of angels that cleave together to God, and sin here can be cast as the prideful quest for satisfaction – at the necessary expense of true community united in love for God and each other.

In Adam’s turning to his own self for satisfaction, there is a loss of moral focus on community as a good and love as a unifying force. As Rowan Williams interprets Augustine, the fall includes the fracturing of the idea that “the good of all persons is both unified and interdependent.”²⁰⁷ In seeking what Augustine determines to be selfish ends, we become, as Williams argues, quite dangerous to one another. He notes that a “wicked human” whose will is corrupted and turned towards its own ends can be catastrophic

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 12.1.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Rowan Williams, “Insubstantial Evil,” 112.

because as the will seeks its fulfillment it gives rise to “twisted and nightmarish desires” in an attempt to achieve a sense of order according to its own ends.²⁰⁸ Fractured into selfish ends, but yearning for the satisfaction of some sense of order, human beings misapprehend the world with tragic results to others and the global community. Interpreting Augustine’s very notion of evil as breaking order and corrupting good natures, Williams argues that “an evil is, by definition, a concrete state of affairs, and a great evil is a massively effective disruption of the world’s order.”²⁰⁹ Separated from the natural order of what is good in community – that the good of all people is unified and interdependent – the pursuit of private goods and personal ends disregards the needs and good of others. The evil and sinfulness of perverse love, in other words, can manifest itself in a way that elevates one community and its flourishing to the abandonment of the flourishing of another. Yet this is a false and illusory good, as humanity’s true and proper good is to be unified and interdependent.

Violence, False Goodness and Innocence, and the Reconstruction of a Moral Framework

The contestation over the meaning of violence described in this chapter identifies the construction of a nationalistic moral order that cannot bear the weight of real experiences of violence, trauma and guilt. A key question becomes “How can we understand goodness, guilt and wrongness in a way that is faithful to the reality of our own violence in the world?” In attempting to authentically describe violence, innocence and goodness, one of the primary strengths of the model of original sin is its sober view of human nature and the world’s brokenness. It provides a way of ideologically resisting

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Ibid, 113.

all claims to ultimate goodness and meaning that arise from human construction – not because such claims are inherently evil or negative, but because they are a part of a broken world and cannot bear the weight of the label of absolute goodness. As Williams notes in the section above, human civilization’s need for something to cling to as an absolute has the capacity to be horrifically destructive and to usher in extreme violence and death in an effort to preserve the “good” that is deemed so valuable. Violence, then, can be understood to stem from this shattered and broken sense of goodness – from a need to protect our private selves physically, but also in order to protect and continually validate the “goodness” of our own private goods. The national narrative serves to shield our sense of vanity from the ugliness of the reality of wartime violence and destruction.

As a description of the situation in which humanity finds itself, original sin utterly rejects conceptions of human innocence. This rejection is consonant with the way combatants seem to experience violence and its effects in a combat zone. Few who have participated in or experienced this violence would use the term “innocent” to describe it or anyone involved with it.²¹⁰ Combatants experience the world as intensely and often tragically broken; they also experience varying forms of guilt in response to their participation in it. The model of original sin upholds this experience as a true experience of the world in which seemingly good intentions and desires are perverted with tragic, deadly and traumatic results, as the base condition of the postlapsarian world is one of deep brokenness. Original sin affirms the experience of the combatant over and against

²¹⁰ This appears to be understood at some level in our culture as well. When reporting deaths, even in training accidents stateside, the American media never reports young military men and women as “innocent” victims. Whereas nearly every report of deaths from either natural causes or even the 9/11 attacks describes the death toll in terms of “innocent lives lost.”

the notion of American exceptionalism and provides resources to critique it as a false perception of self and the larger world. In axiological terms, it affirms the guilt and moral anguish that so many veterans with PTSD experience as a true, valid and appropriate moral response to participation in the brokenness of the world in such an acute way.²¹¹ As Shay and Grossman both note, American society has great difficulty in tolerating any degree of moral pain or ambiguity.²¹² Shay recounts that veterans returning from even the earliest American conflicts have met with stiff resistance to feelings of guilt or shame borne of their war experience. He argues that this attitude stems from a “Platonic/Stoic/Puritan” interpretation of virtue that holds that since fighting for the nation (particularly *this* nation) was a virtuous thing, one should experience well-being upon return. When this was not the case, the clear implication is that the soldier’s virtue is “defective.”²¹³ In the eyes of society at large, it is the veteran in his guilt that misperceives the world and perhaps even reflects his inability to adhere to the truth of American values.

Yet Augustine’s model of inordinate love poses a strong theological and ideological critique to the notion of American goodness and our own cultural desire to maintain it. Tick identifies what he terms America’s “addiction to security” and Tirman argues that the effects of this addiction include a profound apathy towards the suffering of others in the wars that ostensibly provide this “security.”²¹⁴ In loving security (which Abraham Maslow conceived as the second most critical and basic human need behind

²¹¹ I remind the reader again that it does not follow in my line of reasoning that guilt necessarily deserves punishment, but rather is an intense experience of human brokenness that profoundly identifies the need for redemption, not condemnation.

²¹² Grossman, *On Killing*, 96.

²¹³ Shay, *Odysseus in America*, 154.

²¹⁴ Tick, *War and the Soul*, 244.

only the air, water, and food our bodies need to survive) inordinately, we become callous towards the needs of any others and reify our own private good regardless of its intrusion into the well being of others external to it. Not only this, but as the notion that a combatant's suffering reflects his own insufficient virtue suggests, we have a desire to protect this inordinate love of our own security by asserting it as a primal and moral good. Over time, its defense in axiological terms takes on a certain inertia of its own. As Hauerwas argues, it appears that as a nation, we need to engage in violence in order to renew "the moral commitments that constitute our lives."²¹⁵ In order to give meaning to the sacrifices of the past, sacrifices must be made in the present. Having fought so long under the auspices of the frontier myth, if we were to soberly acknowledge that our cause is not uncritically good, it would damage the legacy and tradition that our morality has been constructed upon as a nation since its inception.

Yet as the Augustine's description of sin as "inordinate love" suggests, all attempts at defining a "good" must be understood as temporal and limited. Every principle and tradition that we cherish is capable of being loved inordinately, and this distorts our intentions in a particularly deep way: in seeking to do well and perform nobly in the world and in thinking we are acting so, we are made increasingly blind to the destructive effects of our inordinate love. This conception of distorted love helps describe American society's inordinate love for its own security and goodness, particularly as it acknowledges the effects of this quest for ultimate security: the apathy that Tirman describes towards the civilian victims of our wars. It also provides a framework for understanding the axiological failure of constructions of morality against

²¹⁵ Hauerwas, *War and the American Difference*, xv.

the experience of combat violence and its effects. In military training, a combatant's sense of what is good and right is intensely reformed such that performing one's duty well and eliminating the enemy (and therefore ultimately, the existential threat to America) constitute ultimate success and victory. Tick describes this as the ideal of a mythic warrior – that in participating in battle, one will achieve a profound degree of nobility through proving oneself courageous and brave in the face of threat and danger. Veteran trauma results from the unfulfillment of this ideal for multiple reasons, but chief among them is the moral deformation that occurs due to the combatant being asked to kill “without clearly just cause.”²¹⁶ Shay bases his conception of complex PTSD on an experience of the betrayal of “what's right,” arguing that there is a direct correlation between the unity and cohesiveness of the cultural understanding of “rightness” in the military's combat actions and PTSD.²¹⁷ Yet all of these constructions assume that they are able to protect the psyche against trauma in the combat environment, most specifically in the act of killing. Much of the experience of combatants chronicled by Grossman and others suggests otherwise – that regardless of the construction of “good” or “what's right” or what is “just,” the experience of slaughter, of the “death imprint,” of the expectation to kill in support of the conception of what is good ultimately is traumatic and creates stress within the psyche. Perhaps our human conceptions of “goodness”

²¹⁶ Tick, *War and the Soul*, 169.

²¹⁷ That which he describes as having a distinctive moral-psychological component rather than simply a physiological one. For Shay, the most cohesive societies, in which a shared sense or morality governs actions of citizens, soldiers and those in ultimate positions of power would experience almost zero cases of complex PTSD, as it is caused by a betrayal of social trust – a violation of the shared sense of moral goodness. Shay works primarily with veterans of the Vietnam war, and in this subset of combat veterans, the betrayal of social trust and society's dubious treatment of returning soldiers certainly lend credence to this assertion. In light of my own experience in more recent conflicts in which veterans were welcomed home as uncritical heroes, I cannot affirm that Shay's claim that the moral elements of PTSD arise solely on the basis of this breach of social trust. Given that Shay's latest work, *Odysseus in America*, was published in 2002, I am curious as to how he would describe complex PTSD as it occurs in Afghan and Iraqi veterans.

simply cannot bear the weight of ultimacy that the act of killing presupposes. It may be, as Bonhoeffer suggests, that the only responsible decision among many terrible options is to use violence, but this does not mean that we can ever consider it “just” or “good” and must always understand it as the breaking of a rule or commandment, an action taken in a situation of sinfulness.²¹⁸

The description of the angelic fall as the rejection of the common, unified good in favor of private goods provides a way of understanding the rise of violence as a result of the world’s brokenness. The cultural belief that undergirds all of military training and drives many people to overcome its rigors - that the good of the nation is of surpassingly greater value than the lives of those torn apart in its conflicts - reflects the degree to which the tribal senses of good have become hardened. There is little wartime violence today that cannot be described in terms of the elevation of tribal goods over the welfare of one’s enemies or the good of the enemy tribe. Shay’s entire conception of moral injury and conflict rests upon the notion that a strong sense of tribal identity and common value promotes psychological health when conflict arises with other groups.²¹⁹ Tick’s conception of the mythic warrior ideal also is set in the context of critical tribal values and goods, and its fulfillment depends on the experience of combat being both “just” by tribal standards and providing a proving ground for cultural virtues. While there is little doubt that both visions are extremely helpful for veterans in many ways, Augustine’s description of the angelic fall argues implicitly that the tribal goods can never be

²¹⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West and Douglas W. Stott, vol 6 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Words*, ed. Wayne Whitson Floyd Jr. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 221-227.

²¹⁹ In the third and final section of *Odysseus in America* entitled “Prevention,” Shay advocates a model of military manpower that keeps personnel in a single unit through initial and advanced training and into combat. In this way, values and relationships develop that facilitate common ideals, communication, respect and loyalty to the point that betrayals of social trust and communal values that are psychically destructive are rare.

considered ultimate or universalized because they are a result of the shattering of what is truly good for all humanity (angelkind). It also suggests that violence done in service of national ideal, religious cause or in defense of cultural value must never be understood as an uncritical good, but rather, that it comes from a place of brokenness and fractured identity that by its very nature is disconnected from a sense of truly unified good that is common to all humanity.

A strength of this model of original sin is that it allows for the construction of a moral framework complex enough to handle the guilt of combatants without absolutizing it. The moral trauma and guilt experienced by veterans is precisely what creates the profound dissonance with the morality tacitly present in the underlying narrative of American exceptionalism and identifies its falseness. If the American enterprise is uncritically good and a combatant serving it experiences guilt, then just as Shay's Puritan articulates, it must be because the combatant's own virtue is deficient. In light of the radicality and pre-personal character of original sin, acting morally is not an exercise of determining the proper good to strive towards and adhering to it with all one's ability, but involves the recognition that our very sense of goodness is deeply malleable. As I argued in the previous chapter, a combatant faces forces in training and in the combat environment that deeply affect his or her own willing by shaping the good toward which he or she acts. Shaped by these outside entities, the power of sin's distorting force acts upon and through the combatant and is internalized and propagated by them. If in acting in accordance with this sense of good (based around inordinate and extreme love of security), the combatant acts to kill her or her enemies experiences an intense sense of guilt as a result, then it cannot be said that the guilt for this rests *solely* with him or her. It

is not a failure of the combatant's virtue, constitution or ability to adhere to the path commended to them. Rather, the combatant's experience of radical brokenness serves to critique the very "goodness" of the good in whose pursuit the combatant acted. The distortion of the cultural addiction to and inordinate love of security bears responsibility for the situation that is ironically unmasked through veteran trauma: rather than instill and build a sense of virtue in the combatant, it frequently results in profound guilt and moral anguish.

Chapter 4 – The Privation of Life and the Distorted Soul

“Look, O LORD, and consider! To whom have you done this? Should women eat their offspring, the children they have borne? Should priest and prophet be killed in the sanctuary of the Lord? The young and old are lying on the ground in the streets; my young women and my young men have fallen by the sword; in the day of your anger you have killed them, slaughtering without mercy. You invited my enemies from all around as if for a day of festival; and on the day of the anger of the LORD no one escaped or survived; those whom I bore and reared my enemy has destroyed.”

- Lamentations 2:20-23 (NRSV)

The encounter with death on a broad scale is deeply troubling to the psyche. Over the terrible course of human history, many human beings, such as the residents of Jerusalem during the 6th century BCE destruction of the city by the Babylonians, have witnessed and experienced death in mass and with disturbing physical and psychological proximity. Yet few in the world today experience death and destruction with the same degree of proximity and savagery as those who directly participate in or are affected by contemporary warfare. Modern technology and distance weaponry has made the experience of death more swift, sudden, and larger in scale. The encounter with this degree of death can be particularly toxic to one’s ability to experience the positive aspects of human existence. As U.S. Navy psychiatrist William Nash argues, it is necessary for our psychological health to feel safe, to know that our “lives will not be snuffed out in the next few seconds.”²²⁰ Those who have experienced the violence of combat have experienced the real and immediate fear that their lives may, in fact, be ended in moments and many have seen others mortally wounded around them, both friend and enemy alike. The damage to this core belief, Nash argues, can be rehabilitated through the construction of new systems of meaning that take into account the experience of violence and synthesize them with the more beneficent aspects of human life. Even so,

²²⁰ Nash, “Combat/Operational Stress Adaptations and Injuries,” 53.

this “death imprint” may have a tendency to linger, leaving a lasting, poisoned memory of the vulnerability of human beings to the destructive force of violence.

In this chapter, I will argue that Augustine’s understanding of the postlapsarian condition of humanity as one cut off from the life-giving grace of God is particularly resonant with this aspect of veteran trauma. I will argue that the veteran experiences humanity with an extreme vulnerability not only in the physical way described by Nash as the “death imprint,” but also in a profoundly psychological way that is resonant with trauma research. In the combat environment, the evolutionary features in the psyche that served to protect the health of the psyche as well as the survival of the whole person have been stripped away. This can be understood as consistent with Augustine’s notion of a damaged human nature – it is a distortion of life in which all “goods” one reaches for are tainted by death and violence. I will argue that the accumulated effect of willing apart from the grace of God, the connection to life and goodness – moves us closer to what Augustine describes as nonexistence, and that the veteran experiences this in a damagingly acute way. In arguing this, I will draw upon political theorist Hannah Arendt’s work in describing the encounter with “savage” humanity that has been stripped of civilization. I will then draw upon Grossman’s argument that the very nature of combat restricts our psychological “fight or flight” options for inter-species conflict into a particularly unforgiving set of choices. I will then turn to Augustine to describe this experience as an acute manifestation of the world deprived of the connection with the life-sustaining fullness of God.

Arendt and Grossman: Vulnerability, Evolution and Civilization

From very different fields, perspectives and methodologies, Hannah Arendt and David Grossman both provide descriptions of the way in which we encounter human vulnerability. In a segment of the larger work *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt argues that what are often considered to be “human rights” are in fact not inherent to human beings, but that each right is granted or denied by a governmental power. In “stateless” peoples who have been removed from access to these rights by virtue of their loss of affiliation with a governmental polity, the person who has been granted those rights encounters a sense of suspicion, fear, and revulsion that are deeply interwoven with a sense of vulnerability. Dave Grossman argues that over time and centuries of conflict, human society has stripped itself of the evolutionary protections that propelled the species to the lofty heights of world domination. As a result, our levels of anxiety about confrontation can be traced to an acute sense of our own vulnerability in light of fewer options and “relief valves” in what has been classically posited as the human “fight or flight” response. Both arguments share a notion that the advance of civilization cannot be perceived as uncritically good in all areas. Both point to the ways in which increased levels of civilization can reveal their own failures and shortcomings, particularly as they attempt to provide safeguards for human life.

Arendt and the Threat of Savage and Naked Humanity

The experience of conflict, in the explicit space where one is actively engaged with weapons with another also so engaged, is an experience of legal and moral anarchy. While combatants certainly bring to the conflict a wealth of enculturated ideas that

represent their societal mores and authorities that enforce certain rules are not absent, combat takes place a great distance from what we would consider a “civilized” order and its particular ideals about acceptable and unacceptable forms of behavior. It is far removed from the place where people build lives, attain education, pursue careers, make friends, marry, raise families and live with neighbors in a community. In the combat environment, as Tick argues, the nature of conflict itself demands that we destroy others and in modern warfare, that we do so swiftly and quite violently. In most peacetime societies, lives are spent building and attaining. In conflict, combatants survive by effectively and efficiently destroying and killing. In this sense, combat takes place in an extra-civilized environment where combatants encounter each other not as their civilized selves, but as something made more feral and basic through the demands of violence.²²¹

In *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt discusses the encounter with “savage” humanity that is compelling in its understanding of civilization itself as well as the fear of the savage “other.” Her argument is deeply informed by the expulsion of mass groups of nationals from newly revitalized European states following the Treaty of Versailles. She argues that the central bond that civil or “human” rights hinge upon is not a common humanity, but the agreement among those in political organizations to grant each other equality and access to human rights.²²² She therefore understands the denaturalization of the minority groups within nation-states to result in two distinct losses

²²¹ Arendt, of course, argues that the encounter with “naked” humanity is something that civilization itself finds utterly repulsive and threatening because its very savageness threatens the civilized order. The encounter for her often seems imagined as one between civilization and the stateless, savage other. Here, I will focus on her critical insights in a very narrow lens – the environment of combat.

²²² Clearly Arendt is suspicious of either of these terms that attempt to describe the reality of the rights that we attempt to assign a category to, particularly ‘human rights’ as the appearance of socially dislocated “naked humanity” often was the result of or resulted in the elimination of said rights. I employ the terms here simply as no better alternative presents itself for describing the reality of protections and freedoms that they attempt to identify.

that in effect “expel” them “from humanity.”²²³ First, she argues, the denaturalized people lose their homes and are removed from the very “social texture” in which they live and find meaning.²²⁴ Following this physical and social displacement is the “loss of government protection” – effectually, this entailed the loss of citizenship and any access or right to appeal to a political community.²²⁵ The two losses function to remove the stateless person from any connection to civilization, and Arendt argues that this effectively removes the person or group from any way to assert their rights. Once unmoored from any political community or access to basic societal supports, the people were truly “expelled” from humanity. Lacking an identifying polity, belonging to or participation in a governmental structure, the stateless person is reduced to the representation of humanity in the abstract - he or she is defined through no formal, organized connection to other human beings and thus represents what Arendt terms “naked humanity.”²²⁶

For Arendt, the deeper revelation about humanity in its “savage” state involves a philosophical and psychological reflection upon the revulsion towards this state of “naked” humanity. She argues that at the level of separation from a civilized society, the individual is left completely within his own interior life, “left with those qualities which usually can become articulate only in the sphere of private life and must remain unqualified, mere existence in all matters of public concern.”²²⁷ She states that in our interior being, “each of us is made as he is – single, unique” – the “unchangeable” character of our own interior lives poses a deep threat to the highly organized society,

²²³ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1968), 297.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 293.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 294.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 301.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 301.

which regards individuality as a “disturbing little miracle” due to its inability to be completely sublimated into the political system of “civilized society.”²²⁸ Individuality and difference, which come into full view in the state of “naked” humanity, stand as a testament to the “limitations of human activity” in terms of its capacity to organize, “change and build a common world.”²²⁹ The “mere givenness” of our individuality is threatening, then, because it indicates clearly that there are “realms in which man cannot change and cannot act.”²³⁰ What stands out as truly “alien” in the state of “naked” humanity, then is the individuality of human beings that cannot be completely equalized through a polity or civilization. “Civilized” humanity thus sees this irritable reminder as a great threat to its world-building, and seeks to destroy those who bear this reminder.

A key aspect of this conception for Arendt is that what is different and alien in this state of humanity is not simply threatening to collective civilization, but also deeply terrifying to the civilized person. It reflects a deep fear that we are not ultimately in control – that however masterfully we construct our civilizations, there are wild elements of ourselves and our frightening neighbors that cannot be accounted for in any “civilized” calculus.²³¹ What is exhibited in the plight of the stateless peoples is the precipitous fall from participation in full, civilized humanity into a participation in “the human race in much the same way as animals belong to a specific animal species.”²³² The fear of

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ In terms of the argument put forth by Milgram that people accept a shift into the agentic state without significant resistance for the benefit of participation in a larger, differentiated society, Arendt essentially argues that this encounter reminds people in the agentic state of the threat posed by the unassimilated. Perhaps even drawing upon the knowledge of their own internal, individual resistance (however minor and unefficacious) to the larger agentic demands, it reminds them that it is not impossible they, too could become savage. The savage human is problematically alien and different, but perhaps more problematically, is also “like them.”

²³² Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 302.

humanity in this “savage” state is that it will destroy civilization, much in the way “the wild elements of nature once threatened the existence of man-made cities and countrysides.”²³³ What is ultimately frightening here is that instead of being comforted by the protection our civilization affords us, the encounter with the savagery of the “naked” human suggests that we are ultimately vulnerable – to each other, to the whims of the wild and the forces of chance – in the precariousness of the fight for survival.

Grossman and the Psychological Precariousness of Survival Revisited

Nowhere do the forces of chance, wildness and human savagery intersect more directly than on the modern battlefield. While the experience of daily life within a functioning society often provide a psychological shield from the encounter with vulnerability that Arendt describes, members of the military cannot derive comfort from this. They must be prepared to confront the enemy in an intimate physical and psychological capacity. In some ways, the training the military offers “ups the ante” of the frontier mythology, intensifying the dehumanizing of the enemy and providing mechanisms that guard carefully against any notion of human vulnerability that may prevent a soldier from acting effectively in combat situations. Yet the psychology of killing certainly differs from the psychology of remote apathy. The deaths of others that occur at a great physical and psychological distance from the American populace pose a minimal amount of stress upon the daily moral framework of the average American civilian. Direct killing, on the other hand, imposes a significant stress on the psyche of the soldier and presents an urgent challenge to his moral conceptions. Thus, the psychology of military training employs different tools in preparing the mind of the

²³³ Ibid.

soldier²³⁴ for a violent encounter with the enemy “other.” In this section, I will examine two different ways in which the U.S. military trains its soldiers to “overcome” certain psychological factors that inhibit killing by utilizing the Grossman’s understanding of predisposition and conditioning in the psyche.

In studying the psychology behind actual killing, Grossman finds two “default” positions of the human psyche that seem to underscore an inherent awareness of our own vulnerability. First, he describes how traditional psychology has held that when a member of a species (human or animal) is confronted with a threat, he has two responses: fight or flee. Grossman argues that when confronted with a threat from another member of the same species, the standard set of “fight-or-flight” responses must be expanded to include “posturing and submission.”²³⁵ He argues that aggression is viewed far too simplistically if its only expression in confrontation is understood as a violent fight to the death. He argues that a great deal of confrontations end in varying displays of “very orchestrated, highly ritualized” posturing and aggression, but draws a sharp distinction between this and a “fight” response that results in violence. He finds that very few incidents of confrontation actually end in a truly violent response. Instead, the majority end with the submission of one of the (nearly always) males by “fawning and exposing some vulnerable portion of the anatomy to the victor, in the instinctive knowledge that the opponent will not kill or further harm one of its own kind once it has surrendered.”²³⁶ This common knowledge and understanding of the implicit rule of surrender reflects an

²³⁴ A term that literally only refers to a member of the Army. Yet as it is too cumbersome in such a paper to use the term “airmen” for members of the Air Force, “sailors” for members of the Navy, and “Marines” for members of the Marine Corps and as no all-encompassing term exists, I will employ the term “soldier” in reference to all members of the U.S. armed forces.

²³⁵ Grossman, *On Killing*, 5.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

inherent interest in “damage limitation” on behalf of both the part of the “winner” and the “loser” that is in the interest of the species – younger males were thus not killed off in early violent confrontations with stronger, more mature males and lived to procreate later. The participants in the action seem acutely aware of their own vulnerability, and are concerned not to risk undue damage to themselves or the species as a whole over smaller-scale intra-species conflict.

The second default position builds on the first and essentially reflect’s Grossman’s larger claim that a psychological injunction against killing is present in the overwhelming majority of men.²³⁷ This injunction is closely related to the fundamental responses of flight, fight, posture and submit and reflects again some notion of vulnerability inherent in the human psyche. Killing other human beings, it turns out, rends the fabric of this natural “agreement” in confrontation and runs counter to our biological evolution. This conclusion, in its own way, supports Arent’s suggestion that, in the encounter with the “other,” we are particularly reminded of our own underlying human vulnerability in the “savage” world.

Considered in the context of these basic evolutionary adaptations, Grossman argues, the encounter with killing, death and human vulnerability in combat is psychologically devastating, and he critiques the Veterans’ Affairs psychologists who attempt to treat PTSD as “the vet’s difficulties as problems in adjustment.”²³⁸ It is certainly an undeniable factor and Grossman rightly assesses that “as a society, we seem

²³⁷ Since the presence of women in direct combat situations in any significant number is a relatively new phenomenon and all of the combatants he studied are male, the study possesses the limitation of focusing exclusively on men and the male psyche. Significant insight might develop from a study of the ways the female psyche works similarly or in contrast to the male in these areas.

²³⁸ Grossman, *On Killing*, 96. It should be noted that Grossman’s criticism here predates a substantial amount of positive work on the moral aspect of PTSD done by VA psychiatrists like Jonathan Shay, Edward Tick and William Nash. Until the recent conflicts, however, the majority of those suffering from combat PTSD were treated from the default perspective of “problems in adjustment.”

unable to deal with moral pain or guilt.”²³⁹ The end effect of our “othering” and its continued appeal to American exceptionalism in the larger cultural context is to provide us with a substantial opiate against any notion of moral pain or sense of extreme vulnerability. If our actions, however violent and destructive, can be incorporated into the greater narrative of the good and noble American project, then we can justify the destruction of the “other” as one who stood in the way of the grand enterprise of American civilization-building. It should be noted, however, that for the veteran who has experienced killing and has reaped the psychological consequences in acute PTSD, such illusions are profoundly unhelpful. The guilt and moral pain is real and a terrifying consequence of killing, yet it is perhaps not the only way to understand the psychological break that has occurred here.

To be sure, naming the issue of PTSD as a “problem in adjustment” is not totally inaccurate, because the veteran has come face to face with his own vulnerability and it turns out that it is utterly unbearable. The veteran’s re-assimilation into a society in the power of such a profound denial of the very vulnerability that the veteran has experienced so devastatingly seems ludicrous. What this suggests is that a significant psychological balance has been dismantled – we have rent asunder the psychological fabric and evolutionary biology that allows us to live authentically with the occasional confrontation with another member of our species. The illusions constructed in military training were exercises in disrupting or more accurately, short-circuiting a psychological revulsion towards killing. Grossman at least suggests that our inbuilt injunction against killing allows us to live with a comfortable and healthy understanding of this vulnerability,

²³⁹ Grossman, *On Killing*, 96.

knowing that the “other” is like us and therefore unlikely to harm us, even when disagreement leads to confrontation.

Worlds Polarized by Vulnerability: Retreat and Isolation

One primary effect of the wanton killing evidenced in conflicts (American and otherwise) around the globe is thus to eliminate the psychological hope of escape from confrontation without either killing or being killed. With these possibilities removed from any confrontation the psychological vulnerability experienced is absolute – the understanding that “posturing and submitting” are acceptable forms of navigating a confrontation has deteriorated from modern thought. The options are to run, kill, or be killed; and given these choices, confrontation becomes utterly terrifying, as we are at risk continually. This is a weight of vulnerability that is difficult for the psyche to process, and which it was probably never designed to handle: its safeguards have been violated, so that a sense of equilibrium cannot be achieved either through the illusions that distract others or through incorporation into a greater frame of meaning (i.e., the “noble” cause). Vulnerability can no longer be experienced as anything less than extreme and total and this gives it an unbearable weight that leads to our creation of abstractions simply to shield ourselves from the psychic pain of realization.

Strategic Necessity and the Dissolution of Surrender

In my view, the forces of dehumanization and “irrational hatred” that Grossman describes not only speak to personal experiences, but also fundamentally shape the landscape of the current conflicts. The experience of personal hatred toward one’s enemy

has become extreme in the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, yet is diffused through new forms of media, in which it is documented and easily accessible. In the dynamics that dominate the current conflicts between the United States and Al-Qaeda affiliates throughout the world, each side views its enemy as an existential threat – a threat to its very survival as a political entity. In some ways, this is a legacy of the “total war” strategy that was adopted in World Wars I and II, but has taken on a particular virulence in the Global War on Terror. In the recent conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, modern technology and the resultant rapid dissemination of information have made the “irrational hatred” of the enemy much closer to each combatant.²⁴⁰ Graphic images and videos in recent years have become ubiquitous and have carried the message of hate to a wide audience around the world. The American capacity for hatred and denial of humanity is clearly evidenced in the brutal and degrading treatment administered to prisoners at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, as well as in the persistent use of torture methods such as “waterboarding” at the Guantanamo Bay detention camp. Likewise, the groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda have demonstrated their capacity for hatred and denial of humanity through numerous displays of torture and killing designed to exhibit their brutality and disregard for the lives of their enemies.²⁴¹ Images that display this intense hatred have reached nearly every corner of the globe thanks to the internet and the 24-hour news cycle. These images reach a large and significant number of participants on both sides of the conflict, and are often used as “shock-value” propaganda to re-enforce the savagery

²⁴⁰ I must acknowledge that this in some way contradicts Grossman’s overall point – to experience the dread he describes is to experience the hatred of an enemy embodied physically by the personal encounter with the human being set upon killing. However, my point is that the images of hatred and slaughter that can now be viewed online by combatants on either side of the conflict inculcate a sense of real and deep horror in the mind of the combatant. In other words, they are psychologically affected by the hatred on display.

²⁴¹ Exemplified in the videos posted online which showed in horrid detail, for example, the beheadings of Nick Berg and Daniel Pearl.

of the enemy on the psyche of the combatant, further dehumanizing the enemy. While most who view these graphic images of hatred do not have the expectation of confrontation with the enemies depicted, the combatants do and this reality can channel a sense of revulsion that would be common to any viewer into what Grossman describes as a dread. The message transmitted is received as one of deep hatred: not only is the cause so noble that it justifies killing the other, but it also demands the *elimination* of the other. Further, the strategic necessity to wipe out the enemy creates a particularly unforgiving set of rules of engagement that severely restrict the agency and imagination of the combatants, creating continued stress on their psyches. As the current conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq quickly became insurgencies – a particular variety of asymmetrical conflict - both the American and insurgent forces sought to inflict maximum casualties whenever battles are joined, as direct confrontations are not especially common.²⁴² In other words, there are few opportunities to kill each other openly, so when the opportunity presents itself, it must be seized. If either participant attempts to retreat while engaged with the other, the retreating group will be attacked mercilessly until the attacking side is no longer physically able to inflict damage, or is somehow prevented from doing so. While the classical options of “posture” and “submit” that are commonly available in intra-species conflict cannot be said to be entirely non-existent in this environment, there is no signal that will cease hostilities and allow both parties to walk

²⁴² A conflict in which one side’s military advantage is significantly greater than another’s. This term is frequently associated with insurgencies or non-state actors fighting a developed and mature state power. Its importance to me here is to suggest that perhaps the nature of this conflict increases the need for the lesser-equipped side to maximize casualties in the battles it chooses to fight, further increasing the experience of “irrational hatred” of the soldier combating the insurgency and the sense of dread among the soldiers of the greater-equipped side. Likewise, the greater-equipped side seeks to “root out” the insurgents from among the local populace – an arduous and delicate task. When direct conflict occurs, the greater-equipped side understands this as a rare opportunity to decimate the enemy numbers.

away unscathed.²⁴³ To expose oneself as a combatant to the other is to be faced with a version of irrational hatred that continues off the battlefield as well as on, such that to surrender is to potentially submit oneself to torture, a life sentence in a military prison (or an indefinite period of detention without a hearing), or even execution. Both sides have demonstrated a clear capacity for each of these options. From the standpoint of an American combatant, the net effect of these realities is the internalization of the message that the other's status as enemy is essential, not contingent or temporary.²⁴⁴ To encounter this world is to experience a highly polarized reality that psychologically reifies the boundaries between others and in which violence and death govern these relations. One cannot exist here with anything other than an extreme experience of one's own vulnerability – that life can, and often is, snuffed out at any given moment.

To experience this world is to internalize a distorted and broken relationality marked by a sense of mistrust of outsiders based on the profound vulnerability and hatred demonstrated in conflict. While this mistrust of those outside of one's own unit likely has a positive benefit in terms of survivability on the battlefield, it ultimately proves to be deeply distorting in other areas of life. What forms through participation in (and thereby the willing of) this polarized reality of combat is a distinctive bond of trust between those who have proven to be "on your side" in the conflict. The distortion of relationality often is most visible when combatants return home and have difficulty adjusting to life,

²⁴³ The option to retreat in light of a disadvantageous situation remains viable, as would a demonstrable show of military might that would serve to deter an enemy attack rather than eliminating the enemy entirely. Yet the critical point is that there is no situation in either the war in Afghanistan or the war in Iraq in which one could effectively submit without severe and perhaps violent consequence. Given the existential threat associated with either side by the other in the "Global War on Terror," there is effectively no option to surrender with the understanding that hostilities would cease.

²⁴⁴ It would be presumptuous to speak of the effect of these images on Al-Qaeda combatants, though it seems highly unlikely, given the tenor of most communications from Al-Qaeda leadership, that the psychological result would be categorically different.

particularly with close loved ones who have not experienced combat with them, but with whom they are expected to resume intimate relationships that require trust. Yet it also manifests itself in a more concretized mistrust of those who are different, who are put in positions of the “other” and who, in light of the combatant’s experience of hatred and violence, are viewed as a significant threat.

Vulnerability and the Isolation of Veteran Return

The crushing sense of vulnerability that soldiers experience in the combat zone lies at the root of one of the primary effects of this low-intensity traumatic event: the veteran’s struggle to integrate the reality of combat within the American culture and daily life. There are two major ways in which the veteran encounters deeply discordant realities upon her or his return home, and both of these mechanisms threaten to suppress the traumatic event in the psyche of the veteran. First, in deep contrast to the combat zone, it can be argued that a strong feature of contemporary American society is its denial of mortality. In *The Coming of God*, Jurgen Moltmann argues, for example, that we have pushed death to the margins of society, moving cemeteries to “the periphery of towns and cities,” we die in hospices and hospitals away from the public view, with the result that we no longer encounter death in public.²⁴⁵ Similarly, Serene Jones argues that even the concept of trauma as a psychic wound itself is difficult for our culture to accept, “because it exposes how vulnerable we are, deep inside, to the many forms of violence that surround us and that we ourselves enact.”²⁴⁶ The veteran is thus thrust into a world that continually distances itself from the sense of vulnerability that the he or she cannot ignore

²⁴⁵ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 55.

²⁴⁶ Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 13.

and is deeply troubled by. There is no middle ground for the veteran to move towards – a place where mortality is understood and accepted in a capacity that neither denies its reality nor grants it complete and violent hegemony over the mind. The juxtaposition of the two extremes creates a strain for the veteran, who certainly does not want to accept the brutal reality of the combat zone as normative for all of human life, but cannot accept the denial of mortality once it has been exhibited in the extreme form associated with contemporary military combat.

Second, while most combatants who have encountered the enemy at close range have difficulty fully denying the enemy's humanity, a powerful force in our culture is set on implicitly denying this in order to uncritically affirm the righteousness of the American cause.²⁴⁷ For the veteran who has witnessed the violence of the combat zone and is unable to deny an enemy's humanity, this creates another powerful dissonance. In the culture's denial of mortality, the uncritical praise of the veteran and the national cause crosses the boundary of "positive disposition" of social support that Grossman identified and comes to exacerbate trauma: it leaves no space for the reified veteran to explore the deep ambiguities of a traumatic encounter with the world of war, defined by violence and dehumanizing forces. The strain presents another abrasive collision of realities for the traumatized veteran and greatly inhibits his or her ability to process and make meaning out of the experience of conflict after the fact.

Both of these polarizing aspects of the veteran's return function to suppress one of the major healing mechanisms of trauma: the ability for traumatized persons to give witness to their experience and for that experience to be heard. It is in this process, as

²⁴⁷ While certainly the force of dehumanization powerfully conditions the willing and the psyche of the combatant, Grossman observes that combatants who have encountered and killed the enemy at close range are most traumatized by the realization that the enemy other is "just like them."

Felman and Laub note in *Testimony*, that the unknown and unintegrated event of trauma begins to become known by both the witness and the hearer.²⁴⁸ Felman and Laub argue also that there is a danger in hearing the testimony of the witness as well, that one risks experiencing the trauma, and in some smaller way, being traumatized by it. Even in the best of circumstances, Jones argues, people “often find it uncomfortable to be around trauma survivors,” and the deep differences in understanding of mortality and the reification of military enterprise only exacerbate this.²⁴⁹ The larger culture, then, appears to the veteran to be particularly hostile to hearing this witness. To hear it would indeed be to risk destabilizing some of the formative principles of cultural identity, and the communication is thus rarely attempted. For the veteran, particularly those without extremely acute symptoms of trauma, the event thus often remains beyond the realm of communication and comprehension and thus ends up frequently invading the present.²⁵⁰ Freud observed this as one of the primary markers of trauma: the inability of the past to recede into memory, and its persistent and undesirable recurrence in the present.²⁵¹

These profound differences in perceived reality can end up exacerbating a traumatized veteran’s sense of isolation and contribute to a cycle that deepens the distrust of those most able to help. Jones names this profound sense of isolation as “the most insidious feature of PTSD,” as the veteran’s inability to trust effectively removes the veteran from communities of care “and affection” that provide avenues to healing.²⁵²

The natural consequence of the encounter and prolonged exposure to a reality in which

²⁴⁸ Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge Press, 1992), 57.

²⁴⁹ Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 18.

²⁵⁰ Who are thus less likely to be referred to psychiatric therapy and thus less likely to have access to someone that will listen to their witness.

²⁵¹ Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 19.

²⁵² Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 18.

the injunction against killing is inoperative is a difficulty in building trust. Recall that this injunction often manifested itself in intra-species conflict when a member submitted to the other, trusting that the confrontation would end and he would not be harmed. In the conflict where this is absent, where vulnerability is apparent everywhere, trust proves to be a difficult commodity. It is granted on the battlefield to one's friends and comrades, those who understand the way the reality of combat is shaped, who have experienced and digested the traumatic reality, and upon whom the soldier depends for insulation from his own responsibility and guilt. The veteran who has experienced this is naturally distrustful towards those who have not experienced these realities, and this distrust is exacerbated by the fact that the larger culture seems not simply to be oblivious to them, but to actively deny them.

The Loss of Blessedness and the Deadened Soul

The precariousness of human life and a person's psychological hold upon it is a primary feature of Augustine's conception of Adam's fall and its consequences for humanity. His conception of the death of the soul, which occurs as God forsakes it, bears remarkable similarity to some contemporary descriptions of trauma, particularly that which is suffered by those who have had a profound encounter with the physical death of those around them. The Augustinian conception of humanity's loss of the deep and intimate connection with God as the power that underwrites human life and sustains its existence holds a particular descriptive power in naming the inability of natural evolution and civilization itself to serve as guarantor of human existence. Critically, Augustine affirms the vulnerability of humanity to death and the effects of this vulnerability on the

living, providing something of a “gaze into the abyss” of the human predicament that serves to illustrate the deep brokenness of the world and its inability to mend itself.

Sin and the Privation of Life

Augustine argued that as a result of Adam’s turning from God, humanity has turned from the source of life and goodness and is therefore subject to death.²⁵³ God is not simply the source of all being, but the one who exists in the fullness of being: Augustine argues that God “supremely *is*,” noting that God’s being is the very completion and fullness of being.²⁵⁴ In creating, God makes entities that exist, yet in virtue of their mortal and mutable natures, creatures possess existence with “a less perfect degree of being.”²⁵⁵ The soul, the seat of the highest level of human being, draws life directly from God, the one whose being is supreme and whose existence sustains itself. Creatures are not created possessing the fullness of life and blessedness in themselves, but are able to possess this in the “enjoyment of Him Who supremely is.”²⁵⁶ The most secure blessedness of life comes from “cleaving” to God, remaining in communion with that supreme source of life upon which the soul draws.

In turning to themselves, fallen angels and humans break from this close communion, moving from dependence upon God, whom has being supremely, to dependence upon themselves for their own sustenance and existence. In the case of human beings, this amounts to disconnecting from that which gives the soul its life,

²⁵³ Augustine. *City of God*, 13.2,3.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.2.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.6.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

vitality and meaning and “defecting” to ourselves for the soul’s own satisfaction.²⁵⁷ This defection from God, for Augustine, is the very point at which the angel or human begins to have an “evil will.” Sinfulness comes into the cosmic equation here and through Adam, into the life of all humanity. The soul as created by God has its own existence independent from its creator, but in its state of alienation from God, the source of its life and ground of its being, it draws no life from God. This “dead soul” which in its sinful state is alienated from God still provides life to the body, but retains none of its own life and vitality. In turning inward toward himself, Adam’s “being became less complete than when he clung to Him Who exists supremely. Thus, to forsake God and to exist in oneself – that is, to be pleased with oneself – is not immediately to lose all being; but it is to come closer to nothingness.”²⁵⁸

While Augustine certainly speaks of the retributive purpose of death as the “just punishment” of sin, there is also the sense in which it is a disconnection from that which undergirds humanity’s very existence. Absent this connection, humanity faces a series of “deaths” that result from Adam’s fall: the first is the death of the soul, when it is forsaken by God. The soul, being immortal by its very nature, has the capacity to confer life to the mortal body, even when the soul is forsaken by God and does not have any life of its own. Augustine relates this dead-yet-living soul to the condition of ultimate eternal alienation from God in which one’s soul is unable to experience blessedness in any capacity. Life in this state is “made neither sweet by pleasure nor wholesome by quietude,” but faces the constant agony of despair.²⁵⁹ Following this death of the soul is the eventual death of the body, when it is “forsaken by the soul” itself and no longer is

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 12.7.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 14.13.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 13.2.

able to draw life from it.²⁶⁰ The final and most severe form of death, however, is what Augustine (drawing from Revelation) terms the “second death,” and involves the reunification of the mortal body and immortal soul in eternal separation from God. The body and soul in this state cannot draw upon anything that quickens life, pleasure or goodness, but simply experience eternal pain. Life in this state, Augustine argues, is “not unjustly called death rather than life.”²⁶¹

Implicit in this account of the fall is the claim that humanity cannot sustain or guarantee its own existence apart from God. Humanity has inherited the state of alienation from the source of life and blessedness that enlivens the human soul. Afflicted by this inheritance, humanity attempts to serve as the guarantor of its own existence, depending upon the “dead soul” for all of life and blessedness. Evoking the language of being and non-being, specifically the notion that we are deprived of our proper connection to God, Augustine argues that we come “closer to nothingness.”²⁶² Augustine echoes the language of Athanasius a generation before him, who argued that the chief effect of sin was that it threatened to cause humanity to pass back into “non-existence.”²⁶³ The “dead soul” cannot sustain human life as it is meant to be in the fullness of participation in the divine life. As a result of the fall, Augustine understands humanity as facing the abyss of ultimate death and consumption by evil.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 13.2.

²⁶¹ Ibid., 13.2.

²⁶² Ibid., 14.13.

²⁶³ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 30. Augustine, of course, does not actually believe this to be possible owing to the immortality of the soul. There is a sense in which Augustine’s whole purpose in naming existence in hell to be “existence” is simply to preserve the full horror of eternal punishment in which one retains full sensory capability, but experiences only negative stimulus: bodily pain and agony.

The Precarious Artifice of Civilization and the Unraveling of Safeguards

When their work is read through this particular Augustinian lens, Arendt and Grossman can be understood to describe structures that attempt to sustain human life and ultimately fail to do so. Arendt essentially points to a particularly ironic seam in what could be interpreted as civilization's attempt to sustain blessedness for those within it. In cultivating particular cultures and attempting to safeguard the homes, civic identity, life and future of certain peoples through the reformation of European nations along ethno-national lines, millions of people suddenly were placed outside the bounds of civilization. The encounter with the savage and naked human occurs when one who is inside civilization meets one who has been expelled from it. The particular irony is that it is not that these savage and stateless people exist because the world possesses an insufficient degree of civilization, but rather that their expulsion from civilization and existence as "naked" humans is the result of a kind of hyper-civilization that occurs when nations attempt to secure the blessedness of their people in an intense and ultimate way. The encounter with the savage human, Arendt argues, ultimately reveals that basic human rights to land, identity, life and future are not inalienable, but granted and guaranteed by governments. The encounter with the "savage" and "naked" human strikes a somewhat paradoxical fear in the civilized human: they fear the loss of their own place within civilization, and perhaps even civilization itself, yet they also experience the realization that civilization is itself precarious and even fickle. The encounter with the one made "savage" and "naked" through their loss of civilization's protections for themselves evinces civilization's inability to effectively guarantee life, identity and future for any of its inhabitants.

American combatants may have experiences that reveal the underbelly of American civilization and the costs of our relative serenity.²⁶⁴ The exposure to human vulnerability in the extreme, and to the randomness of wartime violence can reveal the precarious blessing of security in America. In my own experience as a veteran of the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, the realities of life for civilians in these extremely war-torn areas are not easily forgotten even in the more quotidian and secure family life of an average American. My most recurring dreams feature my own children as victims of the wartime violence that I've experienced. In them, violent people often enter my home and threaten my young family; or my wife and children find themselves in the minefields of Afghanistan and in the crosshairs of mortar-firing insurgents in Iraq. In either case, they seem to illustrate my own deep fear that our security is an illusion, and that its illusoriness depends primarily on the randomness through which it is granted. My family lives in America only by the chance of our births, and those unlucky enough to be born elsewhere experience my dreams as their daily realities.

The injunction against killing that Grossman describes can be understood as an evolutionary protection, both to the individual human psyche and to the species as a whole. It is a mechanism that ensures that intra-species conflict does not end up decimating the species itself. As I have argued, however, Grossman demonstrates how the human history of warfare has unraveled these protections. Militaries have found ways to train and condition soldiers to overcome the injunction against killing, and the strategic necessities of modern combat and the influence of ideological radicalism have

²⁶⁴ The power of the term “relative” in this sentence cannot be emphasized enough. It is certainly the case that many groups within the borders of our nation enjoy lesser status than others and what exactly it is that entails identity as a full “American citizen” with all its concomitant privileges and rights is not universally agreed upon.

eliminated many of the basic allowances for retreat, surrender and safe quarter on the battlefield. Veteran trauma, particularly in its severest forms of PTSD, testifies to the totality of the failure of these evolutionary psychological mechanisms to sustain life, particularly in terms of any sense of peace or pleasure. The failure of the injunction has something of a cascading domino effect as its breaking unleashes effects that condition even those who would consciously choose not to kill. Using Nash's conception of "damage to one's core beliefs," a critical cause of psychic injury is the loss of necessary belief that one is not going to be killed at any moment. Whether one chooses to kill or not, the loss of this sense of safety is what is deeply debilitating, and this safety has been threatened by one willing to break the injunction.

It can be theorized that these injunctions function to allow the psyche to bear the natural vulnerabilities that come with human life in community. In the absence of these safeguards, it would appear that the human reaction to this vulnerability has become extremely polarized and dichotomous in ways that further alienate the community from the fullness of human life. The veteran who has experienced vulnerability first hand in an intense and profound way struggles to recover and rebuild his core sense of safety and security in the world. American society as a whole attempts to ignore human vulnerability and pushes thoughts of death and mortality to the fringes of society and cultural memory. The dichotomy serves to isolate each group from the other in a way that increases veteran trauma and hardens tribal boundaries within the larger national community. Both are reflections of the sense that naked human vulnerability is such a terrifying reality, particularly in our current environment, that facing it is to be avoided, lest we become deeply traumatized.

Augustine and the Gaze Into the Abyss

William Nash argues that the loss of the core belief of one's own safety and relative security is not necessarily a permanent one. Broken and shattered senses of goodness and confidence in life "are not beyond repair," but rather must be rebuilt in a way that takes seriously the reality of human vulnerability without "sacrificing everything that is positive about human existence."²⁶⁵ Yet there is a sense that in the human psyche, the experience of intense and extreme vulnerability is not one that can be easily incorporated into a new belief system. To use a legal term, it is a bell that cannot be rung: the "death imprint," psychologist R.J. Lifton argues, is extremely difficult to "assimilate and detoxify."²⁶⁶ The cultural reaction that takes the form of attempting to resist and repress this notion, in other words, is perhaps simply a highly cultivated outgrowth of a necessary psychological defense mechanism.

The model of original sin I have described does little to make this somewhat bleak aspect of the human situation any less so. In fact, what Augustine argues is essentially that this understanding of human vulnerability is an accurate assessment of humanity's plight and the severity of the problem of sin. Disconnected from God, the source of life and goodness, there is nothing that can sustain human life or effectively shield us from looking into the abyss and experiencing terror at our fate. The combatant who experiences this reality first hand in an acute battlefield situation essentially has an encounter with death in the ways that Augustine describes it. Often, he or she has an

²⁶⁵ Nash, "Combat/Operational Stress Adaptations and Injuries," 54.

²⁶⁶ R.J. Lifton, "Understanding the traumatized self: Imagery, symbolization, and transformation," in *Human Adaptation to Extreme Stress*, eds. J.P. Wilson, Z. Harel and B. Kahana (New York: Plenum Press, 1988), 18.

encounter with physical death, whether that of comrades, enemies, or civilians that leaves a lasting impression. Army medics often experience this particular sense acutely, witnessing large numbers of mortal injuries and dealing not simply with the dead body of a fallen soldier, but with the agonizing final moments of terrified soldiers dying in great pain.²⁶⁷

Augustine's understanding of the ways in which death threatens postlapsarian humanity resonates with the ways in which contemporary trauma theorists understand the psychological effect of being overwhelmed by an experience of physical death. Those struggling to assimilate the "death imprint" may describe their professed "joyless" state of being and may testify to their incapacity to experience enjoyment in any activity – a resonance with what Augustine describes as a "dead soul." In one of the formative texts in trauma theory, Cathy Caruth names trauma as an event of death that lingers into life, focusing on the "endless impact" that it makes upon the one who survives.²⁶⁸ She describes the impact of the experience as a certain kind of struggle between two compelling poles; "the oscillation between a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life."²⁶⁹ Trauma, for Caruth, at its core involves the psychological attempt to return to equilibrium that is disrupted by the "unbearable" brush with death in a stressful experience and the "unbearable nature of its survival."²⁷⁰ Similarly, Serene Jones differentiates a traumatic event from one that is simply an instance of extreme stress by

²⁶⁷ John Keegan and Richard Holmes, *Soldiers: A History of Men in Battle* (London: Hamilton Press, 1985), 154. Keegan and Holmes recount the first-hand narratives of soldiers dealing with the screams of the dying and in their traumatic pain, their reversion to childhood sources of comfort – many with grievous wounds cry out in their last moments for their mothers.

²⁶⁸ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 7.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

noting that in a traumatic event, one “experiences the threat of annihilation.”²⁷¹ It is precisely in the brush with one’s own vulnerability and the vulnerability of others that one becomes traumatized. Jones argues that this experience of being overwhelmed by the prospect of annihilation can result in a paralyzing feeling of passivity in the world and a loss of agency. Those traumatized by this annihilating force may also experience a failure of memory and a diminishment of language use, a deep sense of dissociation from their own experiences, a loss of hope, and an “emotional and cognitive deadness.”²⁷² The experience of human vulnerability penetrates deep into the psyche, and its effects appear to numb the mind’s capacity for positive emotion.

As one attempts to rebuild from an experience of deep vulnerability, the concept of original sin serves as a reminder that in humanity’s postlapsarian state, there is no absolutely secure foundation upon which to begin. It is important to note that this does not suggest that all efforts at reconstructing a sense of what Nash describes as “core beliefs” that are necessary to function is doomed to failure. Certainly, Shay, Tick and many other psychologists, religious leaders, trauma theorists, medical professionals, theologians and most importantly, those who live with and care for traumatized veterans are making huge strides in developing positive and beneficial avenues of healing that are built around the power of truth-telling and supportive community. But this conception of sin does serve to define all of those avenues as temporal and penultimate. The difficulty in healing from trauma testifies to the power of the “annihilating force” to disrupt the functioning of the human mind. Perhaps the traumatic memory itself is so difficult to

²⁷¹ Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 15.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 17.

assimilate because of its power to name the unbearable state of vulnerability in which we all exist yet cannot bring ourselves to truly confront.

At its heart, the Augustinian conception of postlapsarian human life in the power of death provides a way to name the brokenness and extreme vulnerability that combatants experience. Civilization and our own evolutionary developments cannot sustain our existence or our psychological health in the midst of death and destruction, particularly in the extreme forms in which it is experienced on the battlefield. In a dark way, this conception of original sin validates the authenticity of this human experience in all its horror as a profound and very basic description of the world's wrongness. The forces of sin have so distorted the fabric of human existence that we exist in a state of extreme vulnerability of both body and soul. The doctrine upholds an experience of the fragility and precariousness of human life as disconnected from the divine source which can alone can uphold and sustain life in all its fullness. In many ways, this is a statement of the gospel understanding of sin in its most raw form. Rowan Williams argues that a key aspect of witness to Christ is to authentically name and witness to the darkness of the world, to be unafraid of "looking with honesty at that chaos."²⁷³ The naming of human fragility as a profound consequence of the world's sinfulness and brokenness does precisely that.

²⁷³ Rowan Williams, *Being Christian: Baptism, Bible, Eucharist, Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2014), 5.

Chapter 5 – Perpetrators and Victims - The Enslavement of Agency and Betrayal of Identity

“For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?”

- Romans 7:22-24 (NRSV)

I argued in chapter 2 that there are external forces that profoundly restrict and delimit the boundaries of a combatant’s willing. In this chapter, I will return to this theme in order to more closely examine the ways in which McFadyen’s notion that victims of abuse “may feel trapped in the trajectory” of their own willing as a result of the external distortions they’ve deeply internalized may profoundly describe the situation in which many veterans find themselves.²⁷⁴ Resonant with Paul’s description of the captivity and misery of sin in Romans 7, veterans experience war as a force that radically consumes and enslaves their very selves and greatly distorts their capacities to act in the world. Veteran trauma is deeply connected to the disfiguring of combatants’ senses of good, and, as a result, their agency is profoundly abused and betrayed by a power that combatants trust to uphold moral and social order. When the experience of war demonstrates a totalizing disregard for either moral or social norms and instead promotes a singular desire for domination, the combatant’s identity and very character suffer at the hands of the cause to which they have committed their “lives, fortunes and sacred honor.”²⁷⁵

²⁷⁴ This line of argument certainly begins to blur the boundaries of the abuser and the victim, or more accurately, continues to blur the lines that McFadyen began to blur in the trajectory of his thought. This is a critical issue that bears a great deal of comment, and I will return to it for a thorough treatment in the final chapter of this work.

²⁷⁵ U.S. Declaration of Independence, 1776.

A critical element that differentiates veteran trauma from more classical presentations of PTSD is the substantial difference in the character of the agency that veterans exercise. Many victims of assault, rape, or other violent crime describe a debilitating sense of powerlessness or passivity in the face of an annihilating force during the traumatic event. Combatants, as one would expect, describe their own agency in more active terms, even during events of extreme stress. In many ways, their trauma is directly a product of their active agency and its constriction through the powerful forces that impact their willing in combat. These differences are critical in understanding how the experiences of veteran trauma exhibit the character of “perpetrator” violence, and have many similar psychological byproducts in terms of guilt, pain and remorse. What I will argue in this chapter is that, despite these critical differences in agency, the concept of original sin is deeply resonant with the agential distortions combatants experience and descriptive of their broken relationality in a way that calls into question simplistic and rigid definitions of axiological identity that easily separate individuals into the categories of perpetrator and victim.

In order to argue this larger point, I will examine the ways in which veteran “perpetrator” trauma differs from many instantiations of more passive “victim” trauma, positing that a different understanding of the forces involved illuminates the distinctions well. I will then draw upon the insights of Milgram and other trauma researchers to argue that the unique way in which agency functions in combat deeply distorts the character and identity of the veteran in a way that inhibits their ability to navigate their moral and social worlds. Finally, I will turn to Augustine and McFadyen, drawing upon the conceptual vocabulary of the universality and radicality of sin to argue that the power

of sin to bind the will is such in combat that it becomes difficult to distinguish between victim and perpetrator as radically opposed positions on an axiological spectrum.

The Veteran's Experience of Broken Agency

Jones argues that one of the key markers in the psychological makeup of one who has been traumatized is the experience of an “unraveling of agency.” She traces the problems traumatized persons have in viewing their actions as meaningful and effective in the world to the extreme sense of powerlessness they experienced in the traumatic event itself. She argues that this “loss of will” coincides ultimately with a “loss of hope” for the future. While military veterans suffer many of the same depressive symptoms, their initial experience of trauma cannot seemingly be described in terms of complete powerlessness. If Jones is speaking about a victim of rape, for example, then the powerlessness felt by her cannot correspond directly to that of a combatant wielding a weapon of war. If Grossman is correct, then many combatants were in fact traumatized by their own willed actions. It is critical then, if these experiences of trauma ultimately yield similar psychological conclusions about effective agency, to identify the ways in which the differential in agency during the traumatic event may affect the way in which the traumatized person exhibits this sense of resignation.

Not Simply Destroyed, But Eaten Alive: The Confrontation with a Consuming Force

Jonathan Shay subtly shifts the tone of the trauma narrative, particularly as it pertains to agency, in describing the generally distrustful nature of combat veterans to authority structures. While Jones notes that the force encountered by many trauma

survivors is one that “threatens to annihilate,” Shay describes the metaphorical encounter of the veteran as one with a force that seeks not to simply annihilate, but to utterly consume. The distinction is a subtle one, but while an annihilating force seeks to render someone powerless and even lifeless, the consuming force seeks to capture, ingest and devour, leaving no trace of individual being or personhood, but assimilating all it consumes into itself. Shay draws upon Odysseus’ encounter with the carnivorous Cyclops to describe the veteran’s feeling of powerlessness in his or her interaction with the government. Just as the vast power differential between the enormous Cyclops and Odysseus’ men prevents them from realistically struggling against it, so do some veterans often feel that in interactions with the authoritative government, they are “liable to be eaten alive.”²⁷⁶ Against a governmental force that consumes their very sense of identity, Shay notes that like Odysseus, they may have to rely on their cunning in order to survive. Odysseus declares himself to be “Nobody” in order to escape the Cyclops and many veterans perhaps feel that they must embrace this same non-identity in order to escape being consumed by something far larger and far-reaching than themselves.

While Shay does not develop the “consuming force” metaphor extensively, it is effective in providing a lens that accounts for the authoritarian power to not simply destroy that which stands in its way, but to carefully bend the agency of individuals to serve its own ends. One who has served in the hierarchy that Milgram describes and has understood first hand the way responsibility, decision-making, and agency itself are ceded to higher authorities may well feel as though he is in danger of being consumed by the force defining the terms of what is “good.” The uniform, badges, insignia, ribbons

²⁷⁶ Shay, *Odysseus in America*, 47.

and awards constitute a highly developed system that forcefully depicts one's identity and how it has been defined within the strict confines of military service. If indeed, as I have argued in chapter 2, the combatant finds himself in the midst of myriad and profound forces that have the power to constrict, limit and condition his own agency and greatly impinge upon his individuality, then the veteran may indeed fear being consumed and assimilated. The act of killing, however, reveals a separate distinct way in which this metaphor works as well. Recall that Grossman argues that killing directly contradicts a deep-seated injunction against it, and through training, one is conditioned to overcome this injunction in the service of a greater good. If this is the case, than it is possible that what the veteran relates in this fear of consumption is that he has himself become the monster, his agency having been devoured and compelled to perform deeds he sees as monstrous. Shay notes that in his work with Vietnam veterans, many isolate themselves from others due to the fear of inflicting their self-revulsion on someone else. He notes that they seem to feel as they do "because of the actual cruelty, violence, and coercion they have committed" both in Vietnam, and often to those close to them at home after their return.²⁷⁷

As one's agency is intimately linked to an expression of selfhood, particularly in the modern conception, then against the forces that condition and shape willing in combat, one's very sense of identity and self may be in danger of being consumed. In arguing that PTSD should best be understood as an identity crisis, Edward Tick is essentially arguing that war fundamentally reshapes the interior drives and relationships that constitute the self, notably those of love, beauty, order and form.²⁷⁸ The dictates and

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 83.

²⁷⁸ Tick, *War and the Soul*, 122-124, 151-155.

demands of combat consume the combatant's sense of self and identity, and as their behaviors become more isolating, violent, and aggressive, they reflect the consumption of their previous identity by the forces of conflict. Tick argues that what we understand least about war is precisely that it "changes its participants forever," choosing instead to "promote the idea...that vets and survivors can resume an ordinary civilian identity."²⁷⁹ If conflict reduces one's self-proscribed identity to that of "nobody" as an adaptive survival mechanism, then veterans may exhibit behavior that seeks to critically preserve key parts of their own memory, particularly the memories of lost comrades. Shay notes that many veterans are deeply committed to "keeping faith" with those brothers and sisters in arms who were close to them. It is a sense of deep honor for most veterans who, as Odysseus promises to the fallen Elpenor in the underworld, refuse to "forget a thing" about the deaths of their friends.²⁸⁰ In my view, this is a stand against the forces of war that threaten to utterly consume the fallen comrade. It is a refusal to allow the person to be lost to memory, to be consumed by the larger conflict and to be remembered only in war memorials that present his goodness in terms of the degree to which his agency and individuality were sacrificed to the larger war effort.

The Polar Reactions: Recklessness and the Refusal to Relinquish Control

Among those suffering from PTSD (even those who do not exhibit many of its more severe symptoms), researchers have noted dichotomous and polar behaviors

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 155.

²⁸⁰ Shay, *Odysseus in America*, 80. Shay notes, too, that a veteran's refusal to "let go" of the memory of a close comrade's death saps energy from them and often causes bitterness and resentment among their loved ones. The family members of returned veterans do not often understand what they are asking when they implore their loved one to simply "let something go." To the veteran, it is perceived as them asking him to dishonor himself and such a request is often greeted with anger on his part, further problematizing relations within his well-intentioned family.

categorized on the one end by an extreme recklessness and on the other by an intense and all-consuming safeguarding of one's own responsibility and actions. While the precise causes of these behaviors involve complex series of chemical and psychological processes and cannot be easily ascertained, I will present them with the assumption that my argument in the previous section holds explanatory power: that the veterans have experienced an encounter with a force that threatens to devour, notably that threatens to utterly devour agency and individuality.

On one end of this spectrum of behavior lies an attitude that appears to exhibit a complete recklessness, extreme sense of adventure or "thrill-seeking" taken to an unhealthy level. Shay recounts veteran narratives of behavior that seems to belie any level of concern for the self or the consequences of one's action. He describes encounters with veterans who admit to, among other things, diving off a roof, driving motorcycles at extreme speeds on busy roads and randomly punching an unsuspecting family member in the head as they pass by in the hallway of a home.²⁸¹ He attributes these actions to a certain level of "boredom" with civilian life, whose monotony and daily grind they find utterly "intolerable."²⁸² When asked about their rationale for these somewhat wild and seemingly reckless actions, many veterans testify to an almost child-like sense of curiosity, stating that they "just wanted to see what happened" afterwards.²⁸³ Shay describes this behavior as an "attraction to danger" that reflects an inability to live apart from the excitement and "action" of combat, arguing that it evinces a need to "live on the edge" and continually act in a way that demands a response from the cosmos.

Referencing Odysseus' decision to remain in extreme danger in cave of the Cyclops

²⁸¹ Ibid., 44-46.

²⁸² Ibid., 45.

²⁸³ Ibid.

(rather than to flee) simply to see what guest gifts he might receive, Shay argues that the reckless impulses that veterans struggle to control reflect the sense that no matter what, “the dice must be rolled,” fate tempted, and the cosmos questioned.²⁸⁴

On the other end of the spectrum is the veteran who clings desperately to his own agency through becoming an obsessive, mission-focused workaholic. At the extreme end of workplace attitudes among veterans is a determination that crosses over into “fanaticism.”²⁸⁵ Shay argues strongly that financial considerations have little to nothing to do with the work habits of combat veterans. Rather, their primary motivation in immersing themselves in job-oriented tasks is the distraction it provides from virtually everything else that might occupy their minds. He notes that many veterans who operate this way tend to rely solely on themselves and avoid interaction and even contact with other employees: they trust only themselves and often have difficulty cooperating with co-workers. Those who are successful seem to perform jobs that allow them to work in relative isolation and, like Odysseus, to attempt to do everything by themselves. Shay notes that often times combat veterans in civilian jobs, even those in positions that permitted them to work unimpeded by others, would arrive earlier and leave later than their peers “in the service of avoiding contact.”²⁸⁶

While these employees often achieved accolades for their dedication, their family lives suffered greatly. Shay recalls that one veteran in his treatment program worked a relatively low-wage job on the docks at Boston harbor, yet worked so much overtime that he was able to purchase a large home in an upscale Boston Suburb for his wife and

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 57.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 58.

children. However, they “never saw him,” and the marriage ended in divorce.²⁸⁷ In a particularly telling turn of phrase, he argues that many veterans “never brought themselves home with their paychecks.”²⁸⁸ The perfectionism that works well in the closed circuit of an individual project at a job does not translate well into a stable family life. Shay reports that many veterans that he would describe as “workaholic” are “absent, emotionally aloof, irritable, and perfectionistic as parents and husbands,” with many of their marriages ending in divorce.²⁸⁹

Without taking anything away from Shay’s analysis, in my view these behaviors can be interpreted as a response to an encounter with the force that devours identity, reflecting a deeply distorted view of individual agency.²⁹⁰ In terms of the extreme recklessness evinced in the first set of behaviors, veterans appear to exhibit an almost paradoxical view of their own agency and ability to affect events. On the one hand, these behaviors (notably the more dangerous and extreme) exhibit a considerable amount of disregard for one’s own safety and well-being that would seem to reflect a level of resignation that his or her actions are not effectual in the world (since otherwise, they would value their own well-being, upon which those effectual actions depend, more highly). On the other hand, the randomness of the actions does seem to reflect a desire on the part of the veteran to provoke a response to what he or she has done, whether from the cosmos in actions that only endanger themselves, or from others in seemingly random outbursts of violence. This would suggest that veterans do not view their agency as

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 57.

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 59.

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

²⁹⁰ It would be too easy to argue that the danger-seeking actions taken by veterans exhibit a nihilism or a sense that the world is utterly meaningless. Shay’s analysis, as well as Tick’s discussion of self-destructive behaviors (*War and the Soul*, 122-130) compellingly suggest that these actions exhibit far more nuanced and complex psychological injuries and conditionings.

completely ineffectual, but that they are somewhat agnostic to the ultimate effects of their own actions and seek to continually test them. Following an encounter with a force that devours agency and identity, perhaps it is the case that veterans understand their actions to be ultimately ineffectual in the macro-scale. They are unable to change the world, stem a tide of global violence or stand up to the government and they may even be unable to control the outcome of their own lives and affect major aspects of them. Yet in response to a force that threatens to utterly devour them, they seek to remind the “cosmos” that they are there, “rolling the dice” in order to provoke a divine response.

Those who exhibit a certain level of workaholism at their jobs in the particular ways described also can be acting in response to a force that has profound power to persuasively devour agency. In recognition of this power, the veteran essentially shuts out all human interaction that might influence his own agency and impede him from accomplishing that which he can control. Aware of the awesome power of forces to utterly consume and compromise one’s individual agency and even moral beliefs, the veteran effectively attempts to distance himself from any outside force that might demand his attention and focus. Veterans seize, then, on the aspect of life that they can most control – their performance at work. Shay is certainly insightful in arguing that working continuously and compulsively is a “very successful strategy for keeping a lid on things,” and ensuring that one’s mind does not dwell on traumatic memories, yet there also appears to be a strong element of control involved – the veteran may avoid contact not simply because others will negatively affect outcomes that could be fully controlled, but also because other influences will dilute one’s own sense of agency and mission-

focus.²⁹¹ Collaboration with others at work can feel like a compromise of control in service to a larger “good.” As opposed to the demands of a job (particularly one that involves skilled labor and often involves relatively straightforward problems and solutions), family life is difficult because personal relationships require certain amounts of compromise. Most people who have raised children will testify to the difficulty if not outright impossibility of exerting simple “control” over them – their reactions seem random and unpredictable. The “good” of the family can consume one’s actions and can perhaps cause the veteran to feel as if his own individuality is becoming lost within this dynamic.

Constricted Agency and the Distortion of Character

Grossman argues that while someone can be conditioned to overcome the injunction against killing other humans, upon doing so they often respond to their own action with disgust and guilt. After the fact, Grossman argues, the tension, guilt, and revulsion occupy such a significant portion of the psyche that the combatant eventually must undergo an attempt to rationalize and accept his actions. He notes that it often is a lifelong process that in many cases is unresolved at the combatant’s death. Shay, Tick and other psychologists, in differing ways, make the same claim: that forces can powerfully and effectively cause a subject to act in a certain way, but not without

²⁹¹ Shay uses the tale of Odysseus’ interaction with Aeolus, the King of the Winds, to illuminate the veteran’s relationship with habitual and obsessive work habits. In this passage, Odysseus is given a wind that will direct his ships straight home. Aeolus then captures all of the winds that could blow the flotilla off course and puts them in a bag to be stowed on Odysseus’ ship. Odysseus mans the sail for nine days without sleep, never trusting his men to do it, nor trusting them with the knowledge of what is in the bag on his ship. When he at last succumbs to sleep, his men, curious as to what treasure lies within the bag, open it and unleash the winds that blow the flotilla off course and extend their perilous journey. Shay likens veteran behavior both to Odysseus’ behavior in refusing to trust his crew with critical information and to the “lesson” Odysseus seems to take from their “mutinous” actions: that if you want something done right, you have to do it yourself.

significant stress reactions on the part of the subject. This stress and psychological tension constitutes the ground for trauma and more to the point, for psychiatric and moral injury.

Milgram and the Tension Involved in Compliance

While the primary focus of Stanley Milgram's famous experiments was on the ability of an authority figure to instill obedience in test subjects, a significant and oft-overlooked finding of the study is that many subjects experienced significant stress, even as they followed the direction of the experimenter to the conclusion of the experiment. Milgram even called the presence of this profound stress the "second unanticipated effect" of the experiment as a whole, behind only the alarming rate of obedience. Milgram argued that the cause of this stress was the fact that there was a profound differential between what one's "conscience" dictated was acceptable and perhaps "right," and what the experimenter was asking them to do. While very few continued to follow the experimenter's instructions to the end with no apparent discomfort, the "tension" experienced by those who did obey the experimenter to the end was generally greater than that of those who eventually disobeyed.²⁹² In other words, it seems likely that the decision to disobey resolves the tension felt by the subject, while the tension continues to increase and is unresolved in the majority of those who obeyed until the end. Obedience, Milgram argues, must be the "inhibiting factor" of such a magnitude that it essentially prevents disobedience even in cases of extreme tension. The sheer magnitude of the desire or compulsion to obey, he argues further, is so strong that the presence of

²⁹² Milgram, *Obedience to Authority*, 42.

stress or tension is a poor predictor of disobedience. He notes that “even when tension is extreme, many subjects are unable to perform the response that will bring about relief.”²⁹³ Instead, Milgram found that a subject will tolerate extreme amounts of tension, remaining in what he termed an “aversive state” – a situation in which the dictates of his own moral disposition were in profound conflict with the tasks he or she was performing.

Milgram’s analysis of the sources of this tension and stress, as well as the methods of resolving it, has profound implications. For Milgram, the desire to obey is essentially the sum product of the forces that act upon the willing of the subject. All those forces that condition the shift into the agentic state (antecedent conditions) and hold the person there (binding factors) result in the person acting as the recognized authority directs them. While the power of both the antecedent conditions and binding factors effectively colonize the person’s actions, there are several sources of strain that Milgram observed, including the visceral aversion to the victim’s protests and cries, the violation of internalized beliefs, the competing demands of the victim (“stop!”) and the experimenter (“you must continue”), and perhaps most critically, the fact that the administration of pain “is incompatible with the self-image of many subjects.”²⁹⁴ Stress arises as each of these, particularly the subject’s internalized beliefs and self-image, come into direct conflict with the demands of authority.

While disobedience would most fully eliminate this tension and stress, this action (in Milgram’s worlds) “is not available to all,” and in the absence of the ability to disobey, the psyche resorts to other options to reduce the stress.²⁹⁵ The subject may attempt to avoid the victim’s protests, a goal achieved often, Milgram observed, by the

²⁹³ Ibid., 43.

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 156.

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 157.

subject's reading of the questions the victim was to answer loudly and over his cries. The subject may also resort to outright denial, in which strain is reduced by rejecting empirical data supporting an unwelcome conclusion "in order to arrive at a more consoling interpretation of events."²⁹⁶ In the course of the experiment, the subject may actively and passively deny that they are harming the victim through the shocks administered and reject the notion that the victim is suffering at all.²⁹⁷ The subject may also result to subterfuges designed to minimize his or her part in the experiment or to "undermine" its more draconian aspects.²⁹⁸ Milgram found that some subjects, for example, would attempt to pass the correct answers to the victim through vocal variation in order to avoid having to shock them for providing incorrect answers. Whether the subterfuge is effective or not, it allows the subject to believe that he is resisting the experimenter in some way and helps "preserve his self-image as a benign man."²⁹⁹

This analysis reveals two critical aspects of the psyche of Milgram's subjects. First, even though the majority obeyed the experimenter to the end of the experiment, their interior self-image and sense of morality were not entirely brought into alignment with the demands of the experiment. Second, even though they were not able to disobey the experimenter, they took actions to distance the psyche from the actions they were taking and to mitigate what they felt were the immoral aspects of the experiment. In short, the experiment suggests that the psyche seeks to preserve its own self-image and moral ideals within the crucible of a situation that demands they only pursue the "good"

²⁹⁶ Ibid., 158.

²⁹⁷ Ironically, the victim in Milgram's study was, in fact, not suffering at all. The fact that an accurate perception of what is actually happening would be understood as denial, even when all empirical evidence available to the subject would indicate that the victim is indeed suffering, points to the limitations of the artificial situation created by the experiment. I will address this in more detail later in the chapter.

²⁹⁸ Milgram, *Obedience to Authority*, 159.

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 160.

of obedience to the higher authority. The subject, in other words, is aware of the distance between his own ideals and what he is being asked to do, even as he performs the action in obedience to the experimenter. In Milgram's analysis, the tension between one's self-image and one's actions in the agentic state is resolved in the psyche of the subject most fully through the assurance and reassurance that the responsibility for the subject's actions does not rest with him or her, but with the experimenter.³⁰⁰ The fact that subjects sought these subterfuges and assurances of ultimate responsibility suggest that they are aware of the constriction of their willing and take small, perhaps even meager actions to preserve their own ideas about their identity, even as they cannot refuse to do what they are asked to do.

The nature of the relationship between one's self-image and one's personal (though directed) actions is a critical aspect of human willing and identity that Milgram's study brings to the fore. A detailed analysis of them appears to lie outside the scope of Milgram's experiments and analysis for two critical reasons. First, the experimental scenario is ultimately artificial: no victim is actually being shocked or killed. The tension and stress experienced by the subject are certainly real, as they believe the victim to be in pain. Yet their obedience or disobedience has little tangible consequence, as the tension and stress is completely resolved by their discovery that the victim is alive and was never in any pain – it was all an act. Even if, on reflection, the subject felt he or she had acted horribly, it could be dismissed by the psyche as a learning experience as there is

³⁰⁰ Milgram is able to conceptually keep the person's self-image and their agentic state actions separate as in his model of agency, an individual moves between an autonomous state and an agentic one. In the autonomous state, one takes care of oneself and performs the daily tasks necessary for survival and enjoyment. An individual shifts into the agentic state, essentially, to "do what he has to do" at the direction of properly recognized authority.

no real consequence for their performance.³⁰¹ The self-image of the subject of the experiment is preserved, in other words, because the subject has not *actually* had to harm anyone. The subject's psyche, while confronted for a brief period with that possibility, does not have to attempt to integrate the experience of harming or killing another human being into the subject's self-image. Second, Milgram's study contained no reliable mechanism for measuring how the actions of the subject impact their view of themselves after a substantial period of time. While Milgram did solicit feedback from participants several months after their participation in order to gain insight as to how they have reflected upon what occurred, the sporadic nature of the responses he received undercut any attempt to conduct a detailed or rigorous analysis.

Killing and the Colonizing of Identity

Evidence suggests that the most psychologically difficult acts demanded of combatants do, indeed, affect their self-image. Grossman argues that after combatants kill in combat, the psyche attempts to continue to deny the humanity of the victim, working its way through a variety of denial defense mechanisms. Through the action of killing, one is at risk of being identified (primarily by oneself) as "a killer," and these defense mechanisms function to shield the psyche from this damaging identification. One of the more powerful defense mechanisms available to combatants, Grossman argues, is the diffusion of accountability into a group identity rather than a personal and individual one. Through the experience of stress and combat, individuals in military units – particularly those that have been together for lengthy periods of time with

³⁰¹ It could be envisioned, even by the most thoughtful and self-reflective subjects as a failure in a training environment, designed to allow the learner to experience situations and explore the best outcomes without any fear of consequence or negative outcome.

relatively few personnel changes – are bonded together in ways that are intimate and intense. He notes that a great deal of research indicates “the primary factor” in motivating a combatant to kill “is not the force of self-preservation but a powerful sense of accountability to his comrades on the battlefield.”³⁰² The unit so bonded, which is itself a cohesive group and no longer a collection of individuals, thus takes on a certain amount of internal logic and character. As Grossman describes, when members of such a unit kill in furtherance of its own mission and in protection of its members, the unit itself is accountable. The individual, in other words, does not have to hoist the identity of “a killer” upon himself, but can hoist it upon the unit. In this way, the group identity serves to absolve the actions of the individuals in it and shield them from the power of individual guilt and shame associated with having killed another who is fundamentally and inalterably “like me.”³⁰³

Implicit in this construction of group absolution is the notion that if an individual has killed, the realization that he or she has done so is accompanied by his or her self-identification as a killer. When the mechanisms of group absolution and denial defense fail, Grossman modifies Elisabeth Kubler-Ross’s famous “stages in response to death and dying” in order to argue that combatants go through a similar set of reactions to their own acts of killing.³⁰⁴ While these stages include both “exhilaration from the kill” and the subsequent “remorse and nausea from the kill,” they end in a “rationalization and

³⁰² Grossman, *On Killing*, 149.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, 152. Drawing from Milgram, Grossman argues that group absolution and the diffusion of responsibility within a group to which one is tightly bonded (a much lower bar than what Milgram assumed was a legitimate authority to which one would cede responsibility) is what allows groups to do things that the individuals within them would likely not do on their own. This power enables the group to more easily kill those different from them, whether it be a lynch mob killing a black person in the south or a military unit killing those in other uniforms. Grossman notes that police are regularly trained to call individuals in a violent or dangerous group by name in order to remind them of their individual accountability and to attempt to de-escalate violent situations.

³⁰⁴ Grossman, *On Killing*, 231.

acceptance process.”³⁰⁵ This final stage is essentially the combatant’s struggle to come to terms with his identity as a killer in a way that allows him to still preserve his image of himself as a “good” person. It is, in other words, a struggle to justify his actions and killing within a larger framework of meaning that can sustain the weight of a combatant’s identity as a killer. Grossman argues that when this process “fails” - when the killing cannot be justified or seen as “necessary and right,” and the combatant views himself or herself as simply a murderer - then PTSD results.³⁰⁶ Yet even when the “life-long” process of rationalization is “successful,” Grossman acknowledges that “the killer never completely leaves all remorse and guilt behind.”³⁰⁷ Whether one’s own killing was justified or not, one cannot deny his or her identity as a killer. The presence of guilt and shame and the veteran’s grappling with his or her own identity as a killer, particularly over the course of a lifetime, can fundamentally distort the veteran’s self-image.³⁰⁸

Importantly, the self-imaging of combatants is not simply a matter of interior identity, either, but also has profound implications for further willing. The very attempt to assimilate the category of “killer” into one’s own identity is, as Tick argues, the very forging of a “new personal identity” that accounts for the loss of innocence and savage world the combatant has encountered.³⁰⁹ As such, he argues, the combatant goes into the

³⁰⁵ Ibid., 231.

³⁰⁶ Ibid., 237.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

³⁰⁸ It is worth noting that in this case, the limits of the label “PTSD,” particularly as used by Grossman in 1995, become apparent. It is certainly the case that the distortion of self-image that occurs as a result of killing and the grappling with a long process of internal justification transcends the clinical diagnosis of PTSD. Many who are haunted by these actions are able to function highly and exhibit few of the behaviors that Shay describes – they are not reckless or driven to compulsively devote themselves to their jobs, they have loving relationships with their families and meaningful friendships with others. Yet this does not mean that they are free of distortion or that they do not often feel that their worldview is narrowed to the point that their own willing is “trapped in the trajectory” of their own imaging and identity that results from their combat experiences. Their identities may still revolve around their image of themselves as a killer and the subsequent guilt and shame can restrict their actions and thought patterns.

³⁰⁹ Tick, *War and the Soul*, 170.

enterprise of combat with the self-image of a mythic warrior and departs it (if at all) with a much darker and more negative self-image that has been reshaped by the dictates of war. The forces acting on the combatant in training and the combat environment, according to Tick, radically shift and shape his or her identity by redefining the relationships between concepts like love, beauty and order within the combatant's "inner world."³¹⁰ As combatants are unable to fulfill the "mythic warrior" identity, their interior relations are deformed in such a fundamental way by combat that lust, desire, killing and survival mechanisms become intermingled and confused. Caught in between the unfulfilled ideals and identity of the mythic warrior on the one hand and the deformations of combat on the other, the distortions of the combatants' self-image often result in self-destructive and desperate behaviors. Tick describes that after repeated encounters with death and killing, some veterans exhibit this "death imprint" with an insatiable sexual appetite and engage in high-risk and even anonymous encounters in order to "feel the touch of life again."³¹¹ Many destroy their families and relationships with spouses in response to this need, which stems from their perceived identity as one who brings death. Others, Shay notes, may accept their self-understanding as violent people and slide into criminal careers. He argues that "a criminal career allows a veteran to remain in combat mode, use his hard-earned skills, and even to relive aspects of his experience."³¹² Either from the guilt and shame of understanding oneself to be a killer, or from the need to

³¹⁰ Tick, *War and the Soul*, 122-123.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, 124.

³¹² Shay, *Odysseus in America*, 31.

forget experiences that threaten one's self-image, many veterans become alcohol and/or drug dependent at a rate significantly higher than the general population,³¹³

Surrendered Agency and The Betrayal of Trust

A primary source of psychological tension and distorted willing in many veterans is the distance between the heroic self-image often hoisted upon them and the ambiguous and perhaps even monstrous self-image they often have as a result of fighting the nation's wars. David Grossman describes his encounter with a veteran from World War II who had become reclusive after retiring from the Army. The man had been awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, given for actions of "extraordinary heroism" that must by definition involve "risk to life so extraordinary as to set the individual apart from his or her comrades."³¹⁴ Yet the man was suffering from PTSD and his self-withdrawal from the world appeared to be rooted in the fact that, as Grossman puts it, "he is obsessed with the idea that he is a coward."³¹⁵ The dichotomy between what his award noted about his character and that which he felt it to be resulted in a debilitating paralysis of his own willing. In Vietnam, the rejection (and at worst, outright demonization) of veterans by vocal groups in America contributed to a significant gap between the veterans' conceptions of a hero and their own self-images. Shay recounts the tale of a Vietnam Veteran who describes how the war, rather than producing heroes, "strips you of all your

³¹³ Ibid., 36. Shay notes that 45.6 percent of Vietnam veterans abused and or became dependent on alcohol (adjudicating by the American Psychiatric Association criteria for abuse and dependence), which contrasts with a 26 percent rate in their civilian peers. In terms of drug abuse, the rate for Vietnam veterans was 8.4 percent vs. 3.4 percent in their civilian counterparts.

³¹⁴ Decorations, Medals, Ribbons, and Similar Devices, *Code of Federal Regulations*, title 32, pt. 578.10.

³¹⁵ Grossman, *On Killing*, 281.

beliefs, your religion, takes your dignity away.”³¹⁶ He later describes that it makes you an “animal in the sense of being evil,” and that when he returned home, he often acted in animalistic rage, attacking his own family members in inexplicable acts of anger.³¹⁷

The differential in character between the recruiting poster self-image of American warriors - filled with implicit exaltations of honor and glory - and the self-image many veterans hold after experiences in conflict involves a sense of *social betrayal*. For Milgram, one of the critical antecedent conditions that would move the subject into the agentic state was his perception of the legitimacy of the authority to which he was ceding his own sense of responsibility and personal agency. The legitimacy of the authority, he argues further, is based on the power of a justifying ideology to which the subject has already acceded on a basic level. If the subject then understands the authority as acting on in accord with this basic societal ideology, the subject tends to view the authority and its demands as tacitly necessary. This is a critical step, since, as Milgram later notes, the subject cedes nearly all sense of morality and responsibility to this authority and his own moral horizon narrows to questions of obedience to the duties the authority asks of him or her. Implicit in his analysis is the notion that some level of axiological agreement as to the moral values within which the authority will operate is necessary for the subject to willingly enter into the agentic state. Shay similarly argues that actors, most notably combatants, trust that legitimate power will be used “in accordance with ‘what’s right’” as understood by the community.³¹⁸ The breaking of this trust, as Shay notes, is catastrophic and results in what he terms “complex PTSD” – a betrayal of the shared values and moral commitments that undergird social order.

³¹⁶ Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*, 33.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*

³¹⁸ Shay, *Odysseus in America*, 151.

Those who join the military implicitly trust that their participation in the right exercise of power will positively contribute to their character formation, since in joining they are committing themselves to a cause that they know may demand their very lives.³¹⁹ Essentially, they are “buying” what is sold to them by the recruiter (at least on some level) – that honor and heroism is to be found and crafted through their participation in a the noble enterprise of national defense. Enlistment and commissioning ceremonies are profound and sacred rituals that emphasize duty, honor and commitment. When, in the actual experience of conflict, they experience moral injury and the subversion and destruction of what Tick refers to as the “mythic warrior” identity, they experience a sense of betrayal. The damage done to identity and character in these cases of breached social trust is so profound in part because of the power of the agential state to compel human willing. As the results of Milgram’s experiments most directly attest, it is extremely difficult to extricate oneself from the agentic state once it is entered, even when the command given is understood as morally objectionable. One of the largest “binding factors” that keeps people in the obedient, agentic state is their own willing commitment to the enterprise. The refusal to abandon a commitment one has made is such a powerful psychological force that it essentially binds the combatant to the enterprise, and even holds them there while they endure significant moral injury and deformation of character.

This committal bond and the other demands that the situation of conflict places upon the will of the combatant constitutes a system of inescapable psychological bondage

³¹⁹ This is not to assume that everyone who enters the military carries such a relatively exuberant view of their own commitment to the enterprise. Certainly, many who enlist or enter commissioning programs do not have this degree of optimism about their service, and may do so for a variety of perfectly valid financial and personal reasons. Even so, it is unlikely that they enter fully aware of the damage that may occur to their own character, psyche and moral grounding in the process.

that severely damages his or her character. Shay describes the struggle for the will of the combatant as a contest between his own “side” and the enemy: his own military must prepare him to kill the enemy and withstand the fear of them, and the enemy attempts to “dominate the soldier’s will” through fear.³²⁰ Shay argues that on account of the physical terrors of war and the psychological “barriers to escape,” the modern conflict is a “condition of captivity and enslavement as harsh as any political prison or labor camp.”³²¹ The conflict is all about power, he argues, and each side equally attempts to psychologically dominate its own troops as well as its enemy. This struggle for power places willing combatants at the mercy of a force that, at least in terms of its participation in warfare, seeks not to uphold any notions of moral order (Shay employs the Greek term *themis* to connote moral order, and a sense of “what’s right”), but rather disregards (and thus distorts and ruptures) this order in its quest to dominate. The system of enslavement and nearly inevitable betrayal of *themis* in the mind of the soldier who committed to a cause to which he or she assigned some degree of nobility causes a trauma that “destroys virtue” and “undoes good character.”³²²

The encounter with the enslaving, consuming, dominating force does not simply destroy one’s faith in a particular institution or ideology, but damages one’s overall psychological capacity for trust and for moral commitment. Shay argues that the breach of trust granted by military members to the government they serve is akin to the rape of a

³²⁰ Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*, 36. Shay provides macabre examples of this, as units on both sides of the war in Vietnam would “mark” their kills with what amount to calling cards to instill fear of the lethality of a particular unit. He notes that an American unit would place an ace of spades card in the mouth of all the enemies they killed.

³²¹ Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*, 36-37.

³²² *Ibid.*, 37.

child by a relative.³²³ This image both describes the power differential and the level of trust the combatant grants to his “superiors,” yet also underscores the level of psychological damage that results from it. He speaks most frequently of the injury as one of damaged character or *thumos*, the Greek term that is “bound up with the moral and social world that the adult inhabits.”³²⁴ The injury suffered by those whose social trust is damaged is one that severely restricts, if not utterly devastates, their ability to navigate their social and moral worlds. Bound up with anger, guilt, and pain, these veterans manifest psychiatric symptoms that range from apathy to suffering, anhedonia, self-loathing, rage, social withdrawal, irrational suggestibility, hypochondria, extreme belligerence, rage at the slightest disappointment, coercive attempts to establish power dominance, destructive fantasies and behavior and apocalyptic ecstasy.³²⁵ These symptoms and behaviors all reflect a damaged relationship to authority and contribute to a great difficulty in developing and maintaining healthy relationships with family members, employers, friends, and the larger social and cultural world.

Synthesis – Sin as Radical Distortion of Relationality

A practicing psychiatrist, Jonathan Shay writes in *Odysseus in America* that he tells his (mostly Roman Catholic) veteran patients that the Church’s ideas about sin, if they “are about anything, they’re about the real stuff. What the Church offers is about cruelty, violence, murder – not just the sins you confessed in parochial school.”³²⁶ I have argued in this study that sin holds explanatory power in situations of pathological harm

³²³ Ibid.

³²⁴ Shay, *Odysseus in America*, 160.

³²⁵ Ibid., 161.

³²⁶ Ibid., 153.

because of its nuanced description of the interplay between external forces that deeply affect human willing and our very own individual capacities to act. Sin speaks both to the power of the force itself that constitutes the situation and condition from which we act as human beings, our sinful actions within that situation, and the continuing disfiguring of our character and identity that results from our sinful willing. If sin is a fundamental distortion in our very relationality as human agents to ourselves, each other, then attention to the radicality of sin provides a conceptual framework that can, in some ways, help to illuminate the encounters with the consuming, enslaving and traumatic forces that bind the willing of combatants, and distinctively warp the centers of their own selves. The very notion of universal and radical sinfulness is expressed in these distortions and, at least in this situation, raises questions about how neatly we are able to conceive the distinction between “perpetrator” and “victim.”

Identity and the Distortion of the Differentiated Society

McFadyen argues that one of the key aspects of the doctrine of original sin is its *radicality*: rather than occurring episodically or occasionally, it comprises and constitutes the very situation of human willing and action.³²⁷ It endures, he argues, as a fundamental and even primal element of brokenness in our very ways of “being in the world” and fundamentally conditions our most basic patterns of interaction and relationality.³²⁸ These distortions, he argues, work themselves out through the narrowing of horizons, or the instrumentalization of the willing of, for example, those in the Nazi killing units. As they were not authorized to make the larger decisions about Nazi policy regarding the

³²⁷ McFadyen, *Bound to Sin*, 17.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*

Jews or, on a smaller scale, about whether they were to kill those they were ordered to kill, their horizons of choice became narrowed to simply the effective execution of their task. Moral notions are similarly wound around this same axis as “right” and “wrong” become terms to describe one’s effectiveness in executing the orders of higher authorities. What McFadyen here essentially argues theologically, Milgram argues psychologically – humanity in a differentiated society requires its members to shift into an agentic state at various times and places in order to function coherently as a whole. His experiments demonstrated the power of the agentic state to compel willing even in cases where the participant experienced great moral stress and tension in doing so, as well as subjects’ capacity to shift responsibility to those in higher positions of authority.

The move from a homogenous and egalitarian society to a hierarchical and differentiated one was evolutionarily advantageous. Yet if sin is, as McFadyen argues, a poisoning of human relationality at its most fundamental level, then the experience of veterans whose wills are enslaved by the forces of war illuminates the distortions present in the structure of differentiated society itself as a means of human civilization. Having people dedicated to varying tasks and duties certainly provides innumerable benefits to a society in advancing nearly all areas of technology and culture. Almost inarguably, the greatest early advantages of having differentiated professions in the development of human civilization, however, were military ones. It allowed for the creation of a responsive, professional army that was united under the leadership of a single commander, made up of soldiers who were dedicated to their craft, the profession of arms. These armies historically have annihilated those made up of less organized, agrarian societies whose armies were populated by conscripts whose “day jobs” consisted

of a multitude of things not centered around combat. Ironically, it is through the evolution of combat that the most crippling effects of this way of being and relating to each other become apparent.

As Milgram, Grossman and Shay's studies, observations and analyses suggest, the move into the agentic state, particularly in situations involving violence and conflict, creates a struggle for the will of the actor. Each of these researchers presents a picture of human willing that suggests that in certain situations the individual's capacity to will is extremely narrowed: they are at the mercy of the force that seeks to dominate (Shay), are held in the agentic state by the conditioning and binding forces from which they have a great difficulty escaping (Milgram), and have been conditioned to overcome their own senses of morality in service to the greater national good (Grossman). From a theological standpoint, the radicality of sin in the system of a differentiated society threatens to utterly devastate one's sense of reason and personhood precisely because one's personal willing remains active even as one navigates the dictates of higher authorities. As McFadyen argues, "will, in these situations, is co-opted into a more potent and more highly energized dynamic" and yet nevertheless "remains personal."³²⁹ This is true because the exercise of the will that underlies every action is what makes us who we are – our ability to will is what "marks us out as personal agents."³³⁰ To be sure, the antecedent factors, conditioning, and binding forces may truly create a situation that is enslaving to the will, in that it so colonizes the combatant's sense of good that it narrows the horizon of choices available to the psyche to a very few and therefore enjoys a certain degree of hegemony in terms of compelling actions from actors. However, even in

³²⁹ McFadyen, *Bound to Sin*, 133.

³³⁰ McFarland, *In Adam's Fall*, 63.

situations such as these, a personal sense of responsibility, character, and identity, perhaps terms that McFadyen would sum using the phrase “life intentionality,” are all involved and subject to distortion as a result of these actions – because they remain ineluctably the agent’s actions – something she or he *did*. The close tie between agency and identity is evident in the ways that combatants suffer distortions in self-perception, experience guilt, and undergo significant stress as a result of their actions.

Within the conceptual universe of original sin as McFadyen interprets it, the distortion present in the sinful situation and condition from which we act is internalized and distorted as we add our personal energy towards it and intensify this distortion within ourselves. The stress that Milgram’s subjects felt and the subterfuges to which they resorted reflect both their personal inability to escape from the situation and their desire to uphold their own personal sense of morality within the confines of their narrowed horizon of choice.³³¹ Similar stresses were felt and subterfuges were perhaps sought in the wars that were fought until Vietnam, when military training began to condition combatants to act reflexively and to shape their internal senses of “good” more deeply around military endeavor. In the era since, combatants have increasingly felt the distortion that results in their participation in combat, such that their very life-intentionality is powerfully re-oriented as they struggle to assimilate their identities as “killer” and “monster” into a coherent and moral sense of self. The encounter with this threatens to utterly consume agency and identity – to infect and distort until the actor has no agency left that is untarnished by the demands of the consuming force. In theological terms, this can be interpreted as an encounter with an Augustinian notion of sin in its

³³¹ This is the case, at least, for the majority of his test subjects who did not disobey the orders of the experimenter and carried out the experiment to its conclusion.

profound radicality: as a force that utterly twists and binds the willing of human agents, deforming them and their life-intentionalities in the process.

Combat is often discussed in terms of a moral duty, invoking the goods of safety and security, yet the radicality of sin distorts and disfigures this enterprise at a communal, social level. As Shay and Tick both argue in explicit terms, war as a force itself tends to annihilate all sense of value and claim on morality and redefine it in strict terms of duty to the “side” to which one has committed themselves. As McFadyen argues, however, the Augustinian tradition views sin as a pre-condition of our own action and intentionality. In the case of combat, this happens by undermining notions of morality that are not inherently evil by creating illusory moral “goods” under which the utilitarian demands and true moral order of war operate. As Shay notes, the differential between these two moral orders experienced by the combatant constitutes a betrayal of “social trust” that not only damages the him or her, but “destroys the capacity” for that trust itself, replacing it with a sense of hyper-paranoia and extreme anxiety in the most severely traumatized veterans. McFadyen argues that sin at its very core is a relational problem, expressed in terms of relation to God and to each other. Its primary distortion is the impairment of our abilities and capacities to relate to God, ourselves and each other. What Shay articulates is the ability of conflict to distort (if not destroy outright), our very capacity for relationality with other human beings. Combatants experience this in an extreme way, propagating this distortion through extreme aggression in their behavior towards others on the battlefield and in their unpredictable and volatile behavior at home. Their very ability to relate to themselves and each other damaged through the profound distortion of their ability to organize themselves at a social level.

Consent and Abuse – Distorted Identity

The resulting damage to the combatant's willing that results from their experience with the consuming force of combat resonates greatly with McFadyen's description of willing in situations of child abuse. While there would seem to be a distinct *prima facie* power differential between a child whose developmental, intellectual, emotional and social capacities have not fully matured and an adult combatant trained to carry a weapon and make combat decisions under intense pressure, the magnitude of the forces at work on the psyche of the combatant completely dwarf his or her own "personal power" to resist and lend veracity to the comparison.³³² Shay argues that the specific relationship between "child and parent is a metaphor for the relationship between a soldier and his army," particularly when it comes to the cultivation of character through the concepts of "trustworthiness, reliability...self-control, self-esteem" and social behaviors.³³³ The power differential of psychological forces is similar, based on a certain capacity in the combatant to trust, in that the individual soldier in Shay's metaphor relies on the army (notably the culture as represented through his peers and those in higher positions of authority in the hierarchical military structure) for the development of ideals including "prosocial rather than antisocial activity," as well as a "reliable capacity to distinguish reality from fantasy."³³⁴ As he argues further, the breaching of this trust results in

³³² I use the term "personal power" here for lack of a better alternative to describe how one could, theoretically actualize one's potentiality for agency against constricting forces. As McFadyen argues in *Bound to Sin*, 131-140, the term itself is problematic in that it tends to be seen as an enduring personal characteristic rather than a transient one, whose potential for activation occurs "only at the point of agency in a particular case."

³³³ Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*, 32

³³⁴ *Ibid.* A similar argument based upon Milgram's conception of the differentiated society and the move to the agentic state would be that in recognizing the *legitimacy* of an authority, the individual agent places some degree of trust in the authority's axiological values. When there is a dissimilarity in the moral values

character distortions that lean towards antisocial behaviors, paranoia, difficulties in self-control and an inability to trust. This betrayal of trust and power results in a distorted sense of relationality and bends their life-intentionalities in often destructive directions.

There is a critical connection between McFadyen's notion of consent and distorted willing in cases of child abuse and the experience of combatants who have committed themselves to the national cause. Abusers of children, McFadyen argues, are able to exploit the child's own active willing to create a dynamic of "entrapment and isolation."³³⁵ At the heart of the distorted dynamic is the child's notion of consent, as often an abuser will offer rewards to a child in order to confuse the child's desire for the reward with desire for the abuse itself. The result is the elision, within the child's psyche, of desires and consents to the degree that the child may come to believe that he or she has consented to (and therefore actively willed) the abusive acts and the overall abusive dynamic. Similarly, the combatant's commitment to the nation, evinced by their oath to "obey the orders of the President of the United States and the orders of the officers appointed over me," constitutes a similar trusting form of consent that a more powerful entity will not abuse their development and agency.³³⁶ It is also precisely this commitment that binds combatants to particular situations of willing and non-resistance

of the authority and those of the agent, even if the agent is bound in the agentic state and obeys the authority's commands, he or she usually does so under a significant degree of strain, resulting in subterfuges in an attempt to protect the agent's own self-image.

³³⁵ McFadyen, *Bound to Sin*, 73.

³³⁶ The following line of this oath is "according to regulations and the Uniform Code of Military Justice," which is almost universally understood to qualify the clauses in front of it such that it is the duty of the service member to obey the *lawful* orders of those appointed over them. This means that a service member has an equal duty to obey lawful orders and refuse orders that are "illegal or immoral." With the looser classifications of combatants and non-combatants post-9/11 and the Bush administration's sanction of "enhanced interrogation" techniques, these lines become blurred and situations of immoral and illegal orders harder to recognize, particularly in a combat environment. The considerably psychological weight of obedience also, of course, makes disobedience in a moment of moral consciousness a much greater theoretical than actual possibility.

to orders. The combatant is often faced with cascading moral demands on his character that stem from this central consent: since one has committed to joining the U.S. military, one has consented to the (morally distorting and even abusive) situations in which one finds oneself as a part of military life and culture. The recruit may have joined the military seeking the fulfillment of what Tick describes as the “mythic warrior ideal,” but when he encounters a more morally ambiguous path, the external pressure from both authority figures in one’s peers often plays on a sense of duty.

More importantly, however, the combatant has internalized the idea that, even if he was “duped” in a recruiting station, the situation he finds himself in is one that he, indeed “signed up for.” In other words, the recruit consents to join for the promise of moral fulfillment (reward) and this consent is twisted by the forces involved into consent to perform actions that do not conform to the initial ideal of moral fulfillment – yet as this committal bond is so powerful within the psyche to hold one within the agentic state, the combatant, despite the fact that he might have willed otherwise in the absence of the authority, begins to equate his own consent in joining the military as consent to perform morally damaging actions. This is added to a pattern of apparent consent to morally difficult actions, such as killing, that tends to make disobedience a less accessible option as it opposes the profound commitment that one has made to what the national cause and higher authority demands.

Here, too, the ways in which combatants internalize the dynamics of war and attempt to resolve their understanding of their own agency and consent in these situations bears remarkable similarity to those of children in situations of abuse as described by McFadyen. At its base, McFadyen argues that the abuser “bends the child’s willing for

non-abusive objects to abusive purposes by eliding the difference between them, so that the child's willing and intentionality is incorporated into those of the abuser."³³⁷

Similarly, the combatant's desire for honor and the "mythic warrior" identity are bent in pursuit of the more utilitarian concerns of the conflict as directed by those in positions of authority. The willing of the combatant, particularly given the power of the legitimate authority to move the combatant into an agentic state, is incorporated into that of the authority: of the larger aims of the government or military force. Similarly to the abused child, the combatant often develops a negative self-image that is bound up with their own participation in the larger dynamic. Through the constriction of shame and guilt over their own perceived complicity, they view themselves as "monstrous" and "evil," just as children in situations of abuse view themselves as "dirty" or "unclean;" and in both cases the distance between one's respective image of what is good, proper and heroic and one's self-image drives them to a certain degree of isolation. McFadyen argues that the critical point is that the psychological scarring and enduring, long-term trauma are the direct result of the abuse of "the child's active willing and intentionality" by the abuser. The resonance with Shay's description of social betrayal is striking, primarily because just as in the situation of child abuse, the damaging aspect is its distortion of intentionality, of character in the destruction of the capacity for social trust.

The confluence of these two situations suggests that the very abuse of active willing is what causes one to feel "trapped in the trajectory of one's own willing."³³⁸

McFadyen's term "life intentionality" is salient here to describe the distortion of character and identity, the critical parts of the self that have great influence upon our

³³⁷ McFadyen, *Bound to Sin*, 124.

³³⁸ *Ibid.*

future trajectories of action. As the behavior of veterans suffering from PTSD appears to indicate, the changes to character and identity in that take place in combat have the capacity to radically re-orient life-intentionality. As McFadyen argues, the healing of this re-orientation is difficult in part because the distortion at the core of one's identity that is borne from the abuse of one's agency cannot be eliminated, forgotten or ignored even when forging new identities. He notes that the active agency of an abused child during the abuse is what "makes psychological survival through the reconstruction of identity possible," yet notes that any new identity is constructed upon the reality of their abuse. They recover by establishing an identity as a survivor of the horrendous situation of abuse, and their identities, however more positively oriented than within the closed orbit of the abuse itself, are in some ways bound to it and distorted by it. Their intentionalities and horizons and future possibilities for willing are all narrowed by it. Similarly, Tick describes the recovery of veterans suffering from PTSD as the fulfillment of the warrior identity that had been arrested through moral distortion. What this involves in practice, is the honest reckoning with what war and violence actually are and serving, among other things, as a "truth-teller" to a society that continually misunderstands this. This, too, is a "survivor" identity, that while providing a positive framework of meaning within which to understand one's experience, still is rooted in the reality of the abuse of agency that one has suffered and the betrayal of social trust that one has endured.

The Universality of Brokenness and the Problem of Guilt

This discussion of active agency in pathological situations yields another valuable contribution to understanding extreme situations of harm: a framework of meaning in

which to understand guilt and shame. According to the Augustinian doctrines of sin, we congenitally inherit an existential guilt by virtue of our own participation in a distorted human nature. What McFadyen interprets suggests that we experience guilt as we contribute our own personal energies to the distortions exerting pressure on our willing and intensify those distortions in our own lives. Given the power dynamic, differential in intellectual, developmental and emotional maturity between children and an adult who would abuse them, it would seem improper to validate the sense of guilt and shame that abused children feel. If guilt and shame are connected immediately with “blameworthiness,” then such ascription of blame is indeed an improper and morally repugnant position. Yet if the experience of guilt is a psychological reaction to the commitment of our personal energies to the dynamic of toxic and disfiguring brokenness that conditions human relationality, then it loses the sense of moral repugnance and can connect situations of “perpetrator” trauma and “victim” trauma as experiences of and contact with sin in a direct and terrible way. In this way, one can simultaneously affirm that the shame felt by the soldier who kills is as valid reaction to his level of responsibility as agent in an active encounter with the distorting sinfulness that deeply breaks and disfigures human relationality as well as the shame felt by the victim of child abuse is authentic as the result of an active encounter with that same force. Certainly, the adult soldier possesses a far greater degree of understanding than a child and is responsible for his or her actions in a way that a child is not. The distinction between one who commits an act of violation and the one violated by it cannot be eliminated, yet the process by which the willing of both participants is distorted and their relational capacities disfigured is not dissimilar.

If guilt is the way we understand our active participation in this universal distortion, then we certainly experience and participate in it in an interconnected, relational way. McFadyen argues that pathological dynamics cannot be centered on particular instances of human action, but rather appear “as a supra-individual network of interrelations and interactions extended through time,” and that this network “habituates the whole life-intentionality of victims, perpetrators and bystanders into disorientation.”³³⁹ This distinction for McFadyen is directly related to addressing the moral problem inherent in many descriptions of pathological situations that presume that the “perpetrator” in any given scenario has access to avenues of choice to not commit a particular act against another. Yet with sin understood as a universal, radical and deeply distorting force, the key differentiation of the perpetrator, victim and bystander simply becomes the space they occupy at a given moment in their interaction with others at a particular time on that extended timeline of distorted relations. There are not enduring differences in these categories when projected over time, as though any individual were inherently, solely, and irreversibly “victim” or “perpetrator.” Rather, there are variations – albeit variations which are extraordinarily significant existentially in the lives of those who are impacted by them) in the degree of distortion a given individual experiences within any given temporal space she or he occupies on the extended timeline.

The demonstrable power of sin to distort one’s life intentionality, particularly evinced through an examination of the forces that act upon the psyche of the combatant in situations of conflict, questions the fixity of demonstrable moral categories of “victim” and “perpetrator.” As Shay argues, there is little “personal power” that the combatant is

³³⁹ Ibid., 195.

able to muster to resist the forces that constrict his or her willing – it becomes a condition of psychological enslavement that is inescapable. Both “victim” trauma and “perpetrator” trauma (as evinced here in the combatant) involve a similar experience of constricted choices that manifests itself through a feeling of powerlessness against vastly superior forces. What the particular notion of sin draws our attention to is the magnitude of the distorting force itself and the ways that both those who commit violence in conflict as well as those who receive it are overwhelmed by a force larger than themselves and to which they cannot effectively muster a resistance, either physically or psychologically. In other words, in light of this, the distinction between victim and perpetrator of violence in any situation is at least partly a function of circumstance –whether one experiences the distortion in a way that completely colonizes and enslaves one’s willing and agency or whether one is overwhelmed by that force in a physical way.

This is not to suggest that the category of blame is rendered ineffectual under the distorting power of sin, but rather that its connection to responsibility is not straightforward or simple. The framework of meaning I am proposing can be used to critique acts of violence unequivocally: they are blameworthy *acts*. Yet the power of the conditioning force and the near inescapability of the distorting power suggest that blame should be re-oriented primarily towards the acts and forces that distort willing. The forces of hatred, violence and the goods we inordinately love (nationalism, security, tribal identity, etc.) that distort our actions and identities are blameworthy and products of the larger force of sin. To be sure, adult combatants who commit acts of violence cannot escape responsibility and some degree of blame for them. The person who is closest to committing a violent act in a combat setting may be the person with the least available

agency to resist the larger distorting force. The front-line soldier who is trained and conditioned for combat and to immediately obey orders certainly possesses the least capacity to actively resist killing and the excesses of violence on the battlefield. Further up the hierarchy, there are those in positions of authority who have the capacity to shape policy, rules of engagement and standing orders in a way that can either mitigate some of the more deleterious effects of violence or enhance its destructive and disfiguring power. These higher-ranking individuals possess a greater degree of agency and thus the exercise of their agency exposes them to a greater degree of blame when they act badly. Even so, it should be noted that even at the highest level of authority, there cannot be an unequivocal relation between agency and blame: the President of the United States is deeply affected by the distorting force of nationalism and consumer culture and his or her decisions are shaped by the weight of the myriad influential forces that attempt to sway his or her position. The President and all policy-makers and high-level officials are ensnared in the condition of sin and are unable to escape the political, economic and strategic realities that often present them with few good options.

Chapter 6 – Sin as Poisoned Memory and Hopeless Future

“When Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. He said, ‘I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.’ But they said, ‘What is that to us? See to it yourself.’ Throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself.”

- Matthew 27:3-5 (NRSV)

The exhibition of veteran trauma is often centered around an experience of guilt that involves betrayal and even collusion that is borne of the act killing or an encounter with death. Like Judas, many come to understand their own actions as a deep compromise of their own moral principles through the very act of “betraying innocent blood.” Unfortunately, many also tend to walk a similar path as the Matthean Judas and choose to take their own lives – as many as 22 American veterans currently commit suicide each and every day. Often, they cannot contend with their own memories and their experiences have damaged their capacity to envision a worthwhile future. My argument throughout this work has been that a recovered understanding of original sin holds explanatory power in naming the wrongness of the world, experienced intensely and acutely by combatants in wartime and by providing a framework that enables a fuller and richer accounting of morality through the forces that actively distort character and disrupt moral order. Part of the explanatory power of the concept of sin is, of course, to demonstrate its ability to corrupt and compel human willing and its immense capacity to distort life intentionalities in destructive ways. Yet it also enables us to converse in moral terms that lie somewhat beyond the bounds of most psychological analysis by virtue of its vocabulary of sin and guilt, repentance and restoration, forgiveness and hope. Using these deep constructs, it is able to provide a moral framework that frees individuals from

absolutizing their own guilt and sense of moral injury and opens up avenues for self-understanding that are not essentialized and can perhaps lead to experiences of healing.

I will argue, then, in this chapter that the enduring effects experienced by the veteran with PTSD are a poisoned memory that prevents them from being able to properly construct an identity for themselves in the aftermath of the traumatic events and an inability to envision a hopeful future that is pregnant with possibilities for their healing and flourishing. In my examination of each, I will argue that sin, particularly in its radicality, universality and inescapability is, as suggested by Augustine and McFadyen, a valuable descriptor of the ongoing condition of wrongness to which both of these situations testify. Like the ancient symbol of the uroboros, which depicts a snake eating its own tail, both writers present ways in which the power of sin has the effect of both binding our orientations in a cyclical pattern and conditioning us to consume ourselves. Here I intend to essentially offer a contemporary interpretation of Augustine's conception of humanity's broken and damaged nature through the lens of the combat veteran. In arguing the first point, that the distorted willing and intentionality (as well as the exposure to a combat world) produce a poisoned memory in veterans, I will examine the critical role that memory plays in psychological trauma, particularly as described by Pierre Janet. I will then turn to Margaret Suchocki's understanding of sin as the failure to transcend the self, particularly as it relates to one's relationship with one's own past as preserved within one's memory. The poisoned memory often leads to a sense of hopelessness, and in my second section, I will draw upon Jurgen Moltmann's conception of sin as despair to argue that this hopelessness has a profound theological dimension. In my final section, I will examine the ways that the radicality and universality of sinfulness

in the modified Augustinian framework I've used not only illuminate profound areas of human brokenness in terms of combat violence and the human psyche, but also may open unexpected avenues toward healing and hope.

Poisoned Memory

As human beings, we process the world and our own experiences of it through the medium of our own memory. Bessel A. Van Der Kolk and Onno Van Der Hart quote early trauma theorist Pierre Janet as describing the memory system “as the central organizing apparatus of the mind, which categorizes all aspects of experience and automatically integrates them into ever-enlarging and flexible meaning schemes.”³⁴⁰ This system of meaning-making can be stressed and profoundly disrupted by traumatic events, which may resist any form of categorization and organization or may simply stretch the credulity of the scheme of meaning to the breaking point.

Memory and Trauma

Many researchers understand the human capacity to remember as determinative for shaping the ways in which we interact with the world in the present and the ways in which we develop the characteristics that make us unique as individual people. Van der Kolk and Van der Hart note that Janet actually developed the term “subconscious” to denote “the collection of automatically stored memories that form the map that guides subsequent interaction with the environment.”³⁴¹ This mapping of our own experience, in

³⁴⁰ Bessel A. van Der Kolk and Onno Van Der Hart, “The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 158.

³⁴¹ Van Der Kolk, et. al., “The Intrusive Past,” 159.

other words, is the baseline from which we interpret and attempt to categorize new experiences. Janet noted that there are essentially two capacities by which this is realized: through “automatic synthesis or habit memory” and through “narrative memory.”³⁴² Habit memory, which is a capacity we share with all animal life, is the way in which our minds integrate quotidian events that require little conscious processing or attention. Unique to human beings is the capacity for narrative memory, which are the “mental constructs which people use to make sense out of experience.”³⁴³ Narrative memory categorizes experiences together in ways that make up a worldview by which events can be processed and given positive meaning.

Interestingly, the degree to which we remember the specific details of events is inversely proportional to how easy they are to integrate into our cognitive systems of meaning. The experiences that occur that fit with our existing mental structures and systems of meaning are integrated almost seamlessly into our memory systems and in the process of organization are often subtly altered in order to fit the existing cognitive construction. Van der Kolk and van der Hart argue that memory “is an active and constructive process,” allowing for the continual revisiting of memories as one’s framework of meaning shifts. The content of the memory, then, tends to be “malleable” as it is adapted and readapted through “constant reworking and recategorization.”³⁴⁴ However, Janet theorized that when an experience occurs that lies far outside the accepted cognitive system of meaning – those that are particularly frightful or occur under conditions of extreme stress – they may “be remembered with particular vividness

³⁴² Ibid., 160.

³⁴³ Ibid., 160.

³⁴⁴ Ibid., 172.

or may totally resist integration.”³⁴⁵ More modern researchers have demonstrated the utility of Janet’s theory in many ways, as they have found that traumatic memories that resist contextualization and cannot be integrated within the cognitive system that assigns meaning tend to become “fixed” in the memory with an incredible amount of precision and detail. Many who experience the return of these memories experience them repeatedly in exact and consistent detail.

While these memories remain vivid and clear somewhere in an uncategorized aspect of the memory, they must be placed into a meaningful context in order to acquire meaning themselves. Traumatic memories are essentially experiences that cannot be categorized because they cannot be translated into any of the ways that the central nervous system encodes information. As van der Kolk and van der Hart argue, traumatic experiences “cannot be organized on a linguistic level and this failure to arrange the memory in words and symbols leaves it to be organized on a somatosensory or iconic level: as somatic sensations, behavioral reenactments, nightmares, and flashbacks”³⁴⁶ Thus, the memory is often triggered by neural stimuli that in some way recall the approximate conditions present during the traumatic event and trigger the memory encoded in visceral and somatosensory forms. This often signals the locus coeruleus or “alarm bell” of the central nervous system, which in turn triggers the body’s physiological response to danger and initiates the “fight or flight” system.³⁴⁷ For healing to occur, the memory must be translated into narrative terms and thereby assimilated into cognitive schemes of meaning-making and contextualized in order for it to be integrated. Van der Kolk and van der Hart describe this as a bridging between two temporal and yet-

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 160.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 172.

³⁴⁷ Ibid., 173.

unintegrated aspects of life, “the traumatic past,” which the person experiences as unknown, inaccessible, fearful and terrifying, and the “bleached present” which is contemporary existence that cannot be processed because of the disconnected and unintegrated state of the past. The distance between these two states and the disconnect between them form a certain dissociation from the traumatic event itself.

Van der Kolk and van der Hart argue that the part of what is critical in the integration of traumatic memory is that it lose its fixed sharpness and that it become flexible, attaining the degree of malleability necessary for it to be continually recategorized and recontextualized. They argue that once “flexibility is introduced, the traumatic memory starts losing its power over current experience.”³⁴⁸ The cognitive meaning schemes must be able to hold the traumatic past and the present experiences together in a way that gives meaning to both, as many in extreme stress tend to have a bifurcated system of cognitive patterns: there is one inaccessible internal world in which the traumatic event resides and another known to the consciousness in which all other experience resides. In order to bridge these interior worlds, the traumatized individual will often have to overcome an extreme phobia of the traumatic memory, which tends to harden its edges and maintain its unnarrated rigidity. When healed and integrated, the person “does not suffer anymore from the reappearance of traumatic memories in the form of flashbacks and behavioral reenactments” that can be understood as invasions from the frightening and inaccessible inner world that exists apart from the one known to the consciousness.

³⁴⁸ Ibid., 178.

The bridging of these two worlds is, of course, a difficult endeavor; and for many who have experienced severe trauma and suffer from severe PTSD it may even be impossible. Van der Kolk and van der Hart note that a tension can develop over time that makes the integration of these worlds particularly difficult. The traumatic memory is essentially frozen in a timeless sense: it has no contextual narrative or story that it belongs to; it simply exists in the memory as an event outside of time. One's "normal" interior world has a guiding personal narrative that develops and evolves over time as one grows, yet the traumatic memory is ossified outside of that temporal developmental context. In the more extreme cases of trauma, the psychic break between the traumatic experience and its subsequent existence in the mind and the narrative memory that constitutes one's "ordinary" lived existence can become a "permanent duality, not exactly a split or a doubling but a parallel existence" that the traumatized individual experiences continually as a simultaneous reality. The ossified and fixed traumatic existence "has stopped developing" and over time, as the quotidian portion of one's psyche has continued to develop, the bridging of these worlds becomes, as van der Kolk and van der Hart assert, "impossible."³⁴⁹

A difficult aspect that arises from the attempt to integrate the traumatic and quotidian interior worlds is the moral aspect of meaning that one must construct to bridge the two worlds. When a person is consciously cognizant of traumatic memories, even after one has translated them into narrative memory, the integrated framework of meaning draws heavily from the traumatic experience. In other words, in developing a self-image and identity from these traumatic experiences, one is constructing a worldview

³⁴⁹ Ibid., 177, 176.

in which actions and events (notably one's own) take on a measure of axiological value. van der Kolk and van der Hart argue that, particularly in the case of "incest victims and combat veterans," subjects are able to narrate their experience, "but their current life is characterized by doubt and humiliation, by feelings of guilt and shame: past meaning schemes determine the interpretation of the present."³⁵⁰ When the past trauma is remembered, translated into narrative memory and yet engenders these moral responses, van der Kolk and van der Hart describe the remaining work to be done as that of "reconciling" the traumatic past with the present.³⁵¹ Yet the authors note that for many, even these accessible memories prove to be intractably irreconcilable with the identity formed through the individual's non-traumatic memory.

The avenue of healing that the authors suggest in most cases of ossified traumatic memories consists of encouraging the traumatized individual to remember the event or images in a way that more easily integrates with a hopeful and meaningful worldview. The flexibility that is necessary for integration is, in other words, somewhat artificially introduced as the psychotherapist may suggest to the traumatized persons "an alternative, less negative or even positive scenario."³⁵² For example, in treating a patient suffering from the memory of the sight of "horrendous nude corpses of victims of a cholera epidemic," Janet eventually suggested to the person that perhaps one of the corpses got up and walked away.³⁵³ Each example of this sort of treatment they note in their discussion, however, involves what may be described as "victim" or "passive" trauma – an event that one witnessed or experienced with a negligible commitment of personal

³⁵⁰ Ibid., 178.

³⁵¹ Ibid.

³⁵² Ibid.

³⁵³ Ibid.

energy. By contrast, the moral element involved with “perpetrator” trauma seems particularly resistant to externally prompted flexibility: the feelings of guilt and shame cannot be ameliorated without fundamentally changing the memory; and even if it could, the possibility of doing so would raise serious ethical issues.³⁵⁴ The simple moral framework employed by most of society, based on an absolutized sense of personal autonomy, compounds the issue for many veterans suffering from PTSD as it influences their own inability to re-narrate their own memories within a framework that would allow for some degree of moral flexibility and incorporation into a different schema of meaning.

Self-Transcendence and the Relation of Memory to Self

Margaret Suchocki argues that our ability to form and transcend our selves takes place at the most fundamental level in our relation to our own memories. In order to fully appreciate the connection between this conception of self-transcendence and the psychological studies of memory and trauma just surveyed, however, we must first examine her understanding of creation and the role of original sin in regards to human nature. While understanding the value of the concept of original sin in articulating the pervasiveness and universality of brokenness and wrongness that permeates human instantiations of violence, Suchocki argues that “pride” and “rebellion against God” cannot be understood as the root metaphors for sinfulness, as they are inadequate to

³⁵⁴ It would seem highly morally suspect, for example, to attempt to ameliorate a convicted murderer’s feelings of guilt and shame by attempting to introduce flexibility into his own memory of his crime in ways that suggest that he did not, in fact, commit it. Later in this chapter, I will discuss a possible resonance with the framework I have proposed, in which perhaps what can be suggested to the perpetrator (at least in the context of combatant trauma) is the way in which his or her own agency is connected to the hierarchy and sequestered within certain horizons of choice.

describe the full scope and intensity of our violence and, in fact, often contribute to it.³⁵⁵ She desires to redefine the base structure of sin such that it is not understood first and foremost as an action, posture, or way of being that is directed against God, but argues that it should be conceived as primarily a violence done to creation and secondarily to God as creator and sustainer of that creation. In making this critique of the traditional understanding of sin as directed primarily against God, she argues that this view, by providing “one umbrella” of rebellion against God under which to hide “the enormity of political torture, massive wars, cruel oppressions, child abuse,” together with more mundane and less damaging personal sins, effectively annihilates any distinction between sins: insulting someone during a heated argument becomes axiologically equivalent with torturing them to death. Similarly, she argues that the traditional view masks the “real and often intended victims of sin,” allowing one to spiritualize the consequences of one’s actions and ask forgiveness from God rather than the one most directly and tangibly harmed. Perhaps most compellingly, she argues that rather than illuminating the nature of wrongness and sin, the traditional view “fosters...the problem of sin” itself in “isolating the individual from the rest of creation.” Humanity becomes elevated to such a “godlike” role over and above creation rather than an intimately connected part of it that, Suchocki argues, this conception “suggests the very self-deification it condemns.” Granting humanity a special status over the rest of creation actually encourages us to sin against it by implicitly sanctioning forms of abuse of creation that appear to further human interests.

³⁵⁵ Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *The Fall to Violence: Original Sin in Relational Theology* (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1994), 17.

Suchocki thus proposes a definition of sin that revolves around violence to creation itself, formally defining it as “the unnecessary violation of the well-being of any aspect of creation,” and the act of sin directly as “unnecessary violence.”³⁵⁶ Direct violence becomes not simply the larger, second-order effect of sin in this conception, but “is root as well as effect of sin.”³⁵⁷ She then provides a variation on the Augustinian conception of the transmission of original sin by arguing that violence indeed is propagated and transmitted both through “inherited inclination” as well as “socially inculcated habits.” She argues strongly that all of creation is fundamentally relational and that original sin and its effects are perhaps best understood as a violation and distortion of those relationships (similarly to McFadyen).³⁵⁸ These distortions are manifest in our social institutions, in our relationship with our environment and the living things within it, and in our relation to our own selves and each other. Also, these distortions all trace back to a broken relation with God, albeit in a secondary way, since violence done to the well-being of creation is by direct corollary violence and offense done to God as the creator and sustainer of life and creation.

Suchocki’s conception of violence as the root and effect of sin is particularly salient to this study as she develops it in terms of the human failure to transcend ourselves for the sake of creation. Building on Niebuhr’s conception of the “natural” and “spiritual” aspects of humanity, Suchocki argues that they are not polar opposites within human experience, but that spirituality is found within nature. She argues that nature,

³⁵⁶ Ibid., 48.

³⁵⁷ Ibid., 29.

³⁵⁸ Suchocki and McFadyen have a similar view on this specific point – that creation is best understood relationally and that sin and its effects are perhaps best understood through distorted relationality. Their underlying theologies are strikingly different, as Suchocki argues from a “process theology” stance, whereas McFadyen is more committed to a classically Reformed or Augustinian viewpoint. There are obviously plenty of profound differences that result from these divergent starting points.

despite its particular finiteness, is not a stranger to infinity but rather that through its vast and infinite variety, through its varying transience and permanence and through its “inexhaustibly infinite” number of forms, its finitude exhibits infinity.³⁵⁹ Though the lives of individual beings begin and end, Suchocki argues that we cannot know that life itself is not infinite, and therefore that by virtue of participation in that infinite life, “finitude is a form of infinity.”³⁶⁰ This is critical, since she makes the case, again based on Niebuhr’s understanding of transcendence as reaching for infinity, that self-transcendence can be achieved through nature, “horizontally” through nature rather than “vertically” by stretching upwards towards God. Transcendence that stretches outward for the divine in this way does so from a perspective that Suchocki describes as a “withness in” creation as opposed to an Archimedian point that is “over and above” the world.³⁶¹ If, in fact, we transcend ourselves through a certain awareness of our interrelatedness within creation through which we are able to respect each member as a valuable other, then it is the failure to do so that conditions violence and provides a creation-centric “criterion of sin.”³⁶² If we conceive of ourselves as “over and above” creation, then we evince a tendency to dominate, control and do violence to those lesser aspects of creation (as well as humanity) that further cement our position at the top of the created hierarchy.

For Suchocki, to transcend the self is finally a process of achieving authentic “selfhood” within an egalitarian creation that “is in itself finite and infinite.”³⁶³ She argues that this transcendence is established as the self is constructed in three distinct

³⁵⁹ Suchocki, *Fall to Violence*, 35.

³⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 35-36,

³⁶² *Ibid.*, 36.

³⁶³ *Ibid.*

modes: “in relation to one’s own past through memory; in relation to others in the present through empathy, and in relation to the future through imagination.”³⁶⁴ For her, each correlates with a distinct propensity for the perpetuation of violence against creation: the failure to transcend the self in relation to memory presents the violence of perpetuating the past, the failure to empathize with others in the present correlates to violence against the solidarity of the human race as is, and inability to transcend ourselves has consequences for the future in terms of our capacity to imagine and live into that future.³⁶⁵ Most fundamental, however, is the relation of the self to the past as present in memory. Through our ability to understand and incorporate the remembered past (both our immediate past and the historical “fullness of one’s whole past”) into an understanding of our own identity and being in the present, we form a self that relates and is able to relate not only to itself but to others. In her conception, the self is not simply the historical past itself nor “the immediately transcending element alone,” but rather the event of the relation of the two.³⁶⁶ The self that understands and has incorporated its own past into itself “emerges” from that past as it is able to “respond” to it.

What Suchocki provides through this construction is a way of naming sin as that which prevents the proper formation of self, of a wrongness at the heart of our very being that continues to malform us by leaving parts of our historical past unreconciled. She argues that when one is able to transcend one’s own memories and become a “historically constructed self,” that the benefit is that one is not tied to that past, since the construction of the self “involves the possibility of changing – or reinforcing-perspectives on its own

³⁶⁴ Ibid.

³⁶⁵ Ibid.

³⁶⁶ Ibid., 37.

past.”³⁶⁷ In other words, it involves the ability to re-interpret one’s past in light of new experiences of the present – to continue to construct the self and build new levels of relationality with events in the present and with other people and elements of creation. Trauma, she notes, is to be trapped in one pattern that dominates the conditioning of the present. Trauma, then, can be said to be the evincing of one’s own inability to form a self at the most fundamental level. As such, it is a mark of the brokenness of the world and of human nature. It evinces the sin at the heart of the human experience that damages or destroys our ability to form authentic selves and to achieve the self-transcendence that Suchocki implies is necessary to a harmonious existence within creation. The unrelated and unincorporated past (which, given the nature of trauma is almost always associated with a form of violence), is dangerous because it produces a malformed self which exhibits a distorted pattern of relation to the present.

Poisoned Memory, the Malformed Self and Moral Injury

While the resonance between Suchoki’s conception of sin as the failed transcendence of past memory and the discussion of intractable traumatic memory is readily apparent, it also evokes the Augustinian notions of sin’s radicality in infecting and disfiguring human nature itself. It suggests that the effects of sin in terms of poisoned memory is less like a significant, disfiguring or debilitating injury and more like a mutated gene within our DNA. Our bodies work to heal injuries, and even though profound and catastrophic injuries can produce lasting effects, the term “injury” itself implies that it is something that can be healed or repaired in a relatively straightforward way. If we break an arm, it is set, after which it is left to the body’s own healing

³⁶⁷ Ibid.

processes to repair in the proper orientation. If we sustain a deep cut, it is sewn and the body eventually generates a blood clot as it produces new skin and tissue to repair the damage. A mutated gene, however, produces continually malforming and deleterious effects. Medical researchers working with myeloproliferative blood cancers, for example, have isolated a particular gene whose mutation causes nodes within the bone marrow to produce a dangerously high quantity of deformed platelets in the person's blood. As such, the person often suffers a variety of debilitating symptoms ranging from clotting disorders to migraines to a general degeneration into acute leukemia, all consequent upon the continued malformation of the platelet, a natural part of the circulatory system. The body cannot simply heal this problem, because its natural processes are distorted by it; indeed, as many of its natural balancing mechanisms can shift into "overdrive" in an attempt to correct for its effects, the result is the emergence of still other deleterious conditions.

Both in its power to create traumatic memory and in its presence as traumatic memory, sin produces malignant effects on our identity and its formation, particularly in terms of our relation to others. The poisoned, traumatic memory is not simply one that is unpleasant or embarrassing to recall, but one that continues to deform our worldview in the present. The effects are not simply profound and damaging, but because our very identity (self) is constructed through our experiences of the past and how we relate to the world, traumatic memories continue to distort and malform all the subsequent constructions of our relationships with others. Writing about the malformation of identity in victims of child abuse, McFadyen notes that the distortions in the victim's formation of self even long afterwards cannot be predicted. They range from "adopting patterns of

revictimization and abuse [of others],” to “the whole gamut of imbalances in personal identity and relation, from domination to ‘loss of self.’”³⁶⁸ These distortions place them in varying degrees of dangerous relationships with others, and in a point of congruence with Suchoki, McFadyen locates the distortion in terms of wildly varying degrees of empathy for others.³⁶⁹ The end result is the distortion of one’s “network of social relationships and meanings” and the propagation of this distortion in terms of future control of willing in regard to others, a distorted respect of the natural boundaries of self and other and “the handling of intimacy and of affection.”³⁷⁰

Veterans experience similar social distortions that result from the inability to construct an identity that transcends the poisoned and traumatic memories of the past, often manifest in behaviors that reflect the same issues McFadyen names. Many of the behaviors I described in chapter four fit this rubric as well. In terms of self-worth, recall that the experiences of veterans run McFadyen’s gamut of distortions, from those who pursue absolute control in their jobs, with the seeming connotation that anyone else will do the job poorly, to those who exhibit self loathing and almost callous disregard for their own well being (e.g., taking motorcycle rides at extremely high speeds in unsafe conditions). Many propagate violence through objectifying those around them as merely instruments from which they gain data about their own agency. Recall the tale Jonathan Shay recounted of the veteran who randomly punched a relative walking down a hallway in his home “to see what would happen.”³⁷¹ The number of ways in which the traumatic

³⁶⁸McFadyen, *Bound to Sin*, 76.

³⁶⁹ Ibid. The original victim of abuse may later find himself or herself in a dangerous relationship either as an abuser or one without an appropriate understanding of the boundaries of self that risks being continually taken advantage of by others.

³⁷⁰ McFadyen, *Bound to Sin*, 77.

³⁷¹ Shay, *Odysseus in America*, 44.

memories of veterans suffering from PTSD poison relationships and propagate psychological damage within families is almost incalculable. While wives, husbands, sons and daughters suffer greatly in these situations, they are almost always secondary effects from a loved one whose experience has greatly distorted their understanding of intimacy and their capacity to show affection.

The metastatic agent in both of these cases of malformed identity is the guilt and shame that the traumatic memory fuels in the psyche. In terms of the conception of original sin that I have been building, the experience of guilt and shame is intimately bound up with the commitment of one's active agency in pursuit of distorted, false and illusory "goods." Recall that in discussing the pathological event of child abuse, McFadyen argues that the abuser will often intentionally offer the child some inducements and desired rewards in exchange for either the "allowing" the abuse itself or keeping it a secret. This effectively confuses the child's sense of willing in such a way that they come to understand that they have willed the abuse itself and may experience a paralyzing sense of guilt and shame about their involvement in it, even long after the abuse has ended. The memory of the violence in which the veteran has participated has a similar character: conceptions of commitment and honor have been invoked in the service of direct killing and this engenders a distinct sense of guilt and shame. Van der Kolk and van der Hart lend a great deal of credence to the comparison of these two pathological events in terms of the formation of traumatic memory and its relation to guilt and shame. They argue that of those who are aware of their own traumatic memories, their present worldview is characterized by "doubt and humiliation, by feelings of guilt

and shame,” noting two groups of people that are particularly haunted by these feelings: “incest victims and combat veterans suffering from PTSD.”³⁷²

A contemporary way of describing the experience of this poisoned and metastasizing memory is in terms of “moral injury.” Jonathan Shay coined the term in *Odysseus in America* in 2010 to describe the betrayal of one’s internal moral values by one in a position of authority, as well as to differentiate the physiological aspects of PTSD from its axiological component. A group of psychologists led by Brett Litz proposed a more generalized definition in arguing that it is “perpetrating, failing to prevent, bearing witness to, or learning about acts that transgress deeply held moral values.”³⁷³ Both have noted that those struggling with moral injury tend to struggle far more severely with guilt and shame than those who experience the physiological effects of what Shay terms “simple” physiological PTSD. The move from Shay’s early definition to that proposed by the Litz group reflects a different understanding of the agency of the one suffering from moral injury. While Shay focused his definition on the betrayal of one’s values by another in authority, the Litz definition focuses more intently on the deliberate actions and perceptions of the one experiencing moral injury. The explanatory power of the notion of original sin is that it suggests another definition that takes an even more nuanced view of human willing and the formation of identity into account. More than simply a betrayal or transgression of our most deeply held values, a more Augustinian view reflects the very malleability of our deepest internal understanding of what is “good” and “right.” Moral injury, then, may be best understood as the commitment of one’s active willing in service of a powerful and compelling moral

³⁷² van der Kolk and van der Hart, “The Intrusive Past,” 178.

³⁷³ Brett T. Litz et al., “Moral Injury and Moral Repair in War Veterans: A Preliminary Model and Intervention Strategy,” *Clinical Psychology Review* 29 (2009), 695.

orientation that is understood at some point to be false - most evidently by the fact that it does not engender psychiatric well being. In their connection with a memory that continues to poison one's sense of boundaries and relationality, feelings of guilt, shame, moral anguish or ambiguity all serve as markers of moral injury,

Hopeless Future

In corrupting and distorting traumatized persons' capacities for relationality and clouding their sense of self-worth and efficacy, the experience of combat trauma often has a profound effect on their hope for the future. In terms of Suchocki's schema, the failure to transcend the self in terms of relating to one's past has profound consequences on one's ability to transcend the present self and imagine a hopeful and different future. The astonishing rate of veteran suicides in the United States testifies to the sense of hopelessness that many combat veterans feel, as do several new studies that directly attempt to correlate PTSD with a feeling of general hopelessness. While the correlation between hopelessness and moral injury and constricted willing is more ephemeral than that between traumatic memory and the commitment of energy, there is substantial evidence that they are related, and that the theological understanding of sin has the power to illuminate this area in a compelling way.

Connections: PTSD, Suicide, Guilt and Hopelessness in Veterans

The most recent statistics on PTSD, suicide and hopelessness among veterans of the most recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan paint a sobering picture of the psychological effects of combat. A 2012 comprehensive VA study concluded that

between 18 and 22 veterans take their lives each day, and that this rate has remained steady with only minor fluctuations since 1999.³⁷⁴ While there is a significant debate about the precise causal relationship between PTSD and suicide among veterans of the Vietnam war and World War II (in part because of the myriad psychiatric stress classifications and illnesses suffered by those veterans and the difficulty in parsing out data that passes scientific muster), evidence from more recent studies suggests that PTSD is a strong predictor of suicidal ideation in veterans of the Iraq and Afghan campaigns.³⁷⁵ One of the key factors in suicide is a feeling of hopelessness, in which a person can envision that there is no future life trajectory that holds worth or value.³⁷⁶ A study of veterans being treated for varying ailments at a Seattle clinic found that of those who met the criteria to be classified as experiencing “full” PTSD, 67 per cent reported experiencing feelings of hopelessness and suicidal ideation (the two terms were used almost interchangeably in the study). Of those who met a slightly lower standard of “sub threshold” PTSD, 39 per cent reported the same experiences.

As I have argued that guilt and shame are the primary metastatic agents of poisoned memory in the psyche, psychiatric studies also suggest that guilt and shame are primary predictors of suicide in veterans suffering from PTSD. One study of Vietnam veterans found that even amongst patients who met all the characteristics for a diagnosis of PTSD, the primary predictor for suicidal ideation and completed suicide attempts was

³⁷⁴ U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs, “2012 Suicide Data Report,” <http://www.va.gov/opa/docs/Response-and-ExecSum-Suicide-Data-Report-2012-final.pdf> (accessed August 5, 2015).

³⁷⁵ Matthew Jakupcak, Jessica Cook, Zac Imel, Alan Fontana, Robert Rosenheck, and Miles McFall, “PTSD as a Risk Factor for Suicidal Ideation in Iraq and Afghanistan War Veterans,” *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 22 (2009): 303.

³⁷⁶ The connection between hopelessness and suicide is so direct that most studies simply imply the connection.

the presence of guilt related to combat actions.³⁷⁷ It differentiates further the effectiveness of guilt in both inducing an “out of control” state and the crushing weight of guilt that often accompanied the actions taken while in this state. It found that those who committed killing actions while feeling “out of control” felt substantially and demonstrably higher levels of guilt and suicidal tendencies than did those who had committed those same actions in an affective state in which they felt more controlled.

The Force of Sin: Guilty and Hopeless Willing

These studies demonstrate the relevance of attention to moral issues apart from the simpler association of hopelessness and PTSD. My argument is that the modified Augustinian understanding of original sin that I have articulated throughout this study holds a unique capacity to illuminate these moral issues by offering a conceptual vocabulary that is resonant with the situation of veteran trauma. As I argued in chapter 4, the concept of distorted and malleable willing, based on the capacity of sin to subtly shape and distort the “goods” toward which our desires are oriented, holds a particularly powerful explanatory power in terms of the willing of combatants in wartime situations. I also argued there that there is a distinct difference between the agential deformation of a person who experiences a traumatic event passively (i.e., as victim of external forces or actions) and one who is traumatized by his or her own actions as an active “perpetrator.”³⁷⁸ The more passive trauma victim may experience an unraveling of

³⁷⁷ Herbert Hendon and Ann Pollinger Haas, “Suicide and Guilt as Manifestations of PTSD in Vietnam Combat Veterans,” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 148, vol. 5 (1991), 589.

³⁷⁸ I use the terms “passive” and “perpetrator” here to contrast the two, while acknowledging freely that both connote an essentialized idea of “innocence” and “blame” that I am expressly seeking to undermine. There is, unfortunately, no better linguistic way to make the categorical distinction I’m attempting to make

agency in which he or she views their actions as completely ineffective and unimportant in the world, having faced a force that threatened to annihilate them. Those who experience a more active agency in the traumatic event as a more direct “perpetrator” experience the ineffectiveness of their agency amidst a powerful force that threatens to consume their very individuality and self into its larger purpose. Whereas some in more diffuse cases of active trauma, the traumatized person may experience a loss of meaningful agency as such, in more acute cases the traumatized person may come to understand their own willing as hopelessly corrupted and damaging.

What I will argue in the rest of this section is that the traumatized veteran’s awareness of the distortion of their willing - and its metastasizing effects on their future willing – is central to their experience of guilt, cynicism and hopelessness for the future. As McFadyen argues, external forces distort our willing and in acting on these distortions, we internalize them, propagating and adding to this distortion in connection to our network of relations and our own life-intentionality becomes bent in its disfigured direction. Apart from divine grace, we cannot escape these sinful and destructive orientations. Veterans experience this in a particular way. Relating the veteran experience of guilt and hopelessness about their own situation to the experience of Odysseus upon finally returning home, Shay argues that they understand that they “sow trouble for others” through their actions. He notes that what is critical is not that this is true, but that veterans believe that they indeed “spoil everything they touch.”³⁷⁹ The basis of this belief lies in their own experience, and it has epistemological and noetic roots. As Shay writes that veterans “see themselves as toxic because they expect to harm

in a way that is readable. In reality, these fall on a spectrum of active agency in sinful situations, the “passive” trauma victim towards one end and the “active” trauma victim towards the other.

³⁷⁹ Shay, *Odysseus in America*, 83.

others with their knowledge of the hideousness of war.”³⁸⁰ This belief in their own toxicity is often tied to guilt, not only about their past deeds in war, Shay notes, but also “because of the actual cruelty, violence and coercion” they have committed since returning home from the war.³⁸¹ He posits that veterans’ isolation is intensely tied to their own awareness of their destructive capacity, describing how many of his patients “experience shame and remorse for how the lives of their wives, parents, and children have been deformed by the impact of their own psychological and moral injuries.”³⁸² As he notes also, veterans are “vividly aware” of the phenomenon of secondary traumatization in their immediate relationships, and that further damages their view of the future. In my view, and in line with the conceptual view of original sin, the “toxicity” that veterans internalize about their own character reflects an intense awareness of their disfigured willing and the continued metastatic effects of their combat experiences on their capacities to will rightly in regard to their own families and social networks.

A closer examination of the connections between combat experiences and guilt suggests that it is tied to an awareness of the power of external forces to distort willing and of their “yielding” to their corruptive influence. Recall that the 1991 study by Hendon and Haas found that the guilt experienced by Vietnam combat veterans who were diagnosed with PTSD was most pronounced among those who understood themselves to be “out of control” at the time of their actions. The authors note that the “affective state” of such combatants often is one of either “fear” or “terror,” and that the combatant’s entry into it involves a vicious circle of circumstance. Often a friend or buddy is killed, launching the combatant into a “berserk” state, in which he commits acts he later deeply

³⁸⁰ Ibid.

³⁸¹ Ibid.

³⁸² Ibid.

regrets, and for which he later experiences guilt. In a slightly different chain of events, some veterans recounted their “berserk” episode, the near-immediate onset of revulsion and guilt, and the way those emotions were crystallized through the death of a friend or comrade who had not engaged in such behavior and was thus “worthier” than themselves, the guilty survivor. Either way, the fact that the veteran is able to understand his guilt in relation to his affective state and the power of the forces of war to produce it in him suggests an acceptance of the premise that outside forces can deeply affect willing and compel profoundly violent actions. These veterans, who experienced the forces of war in the most direct, primal, emotive and visceral ways also experience guilt and hopelessness in an extreme and almost absolute manner, exhibiting both high instances of suicide attempts as well as what the authors deem “suicidal preoccupation” (the predominance of suicide in their thoughts). It appears safe to say that hopelessness is manifest most intensely in these acute and raw situations.

Other veterans, who exhibited slightly lower rates of suicide and suicidal preoccupation, engaged in killing and even committing atrocities indistinguishable from first group’s, but came later to reflect on the wisdom, judgment and “rightness” of their orders to do so. While these veterans had lower instances of these measures of hopelessness, it is significant to note that they still suffered from psychologically debilitating senses of guilt and shame, even though they understood their own actions through an additional lens of reason or rationality. This lens may simply be psychologically unavailable to those who experience the most intense and acute senses of guilt and shame due to their “out of control” actions. The experience of these veterans appears to point to their acceptance of the conditioning force of authority (in a way very

reminiscent of Milgram's analysis) and its questionable "goodness," even while they did not resist and likely willingly acquiesced to the orders.³⁸³ These cases represent a slightly more nuanced view of the conditioning force to alter veterans' very sense of "good." Veterans in this situation, for example, may feel that their actions were horrible and reprehensible, but not entirely avoidable – they may understand that they had little recourse at the time to act otherwise, given the constraints of the situation. Those who committed actions in an "out of control" state, however, seem to have a greater sense that they could have indeed acted otherwise: they could have simply maintained control.

In either case, both groups experienced significant degrees of guilt centered around the fact that their life-intentionalities and identities were deeply distorted by their experiences. Not only did they report that they experienced deep sense of guilt at having been "made into a murderer," but that this distorted identity threatened them and those around them in the present.³⁸⁴ "Significant motivating factors" in suicide attempts were the fear of losing control again and killing others around them as well as the feeling that they deserved to be punished for their lingering feelings of aggression and rage. In the most acute cases, it seems safe to argue that they understood their own life-intentionalities to be hopelessly disfigured in a way that made a redemptive or meaningful future impossible to envision. In addition, the secondary traumatization of loved ones upon the veteran's return home and the self-isolation that many veterans impose in order to protect others from themselves compound what Shay describes as "irretrievable losses." The broken familial relationships are added to the deaths of

³⁸³ Grossman's analysis of the shift in military training between WWII and Vietnam and the resulting marked increase in firing rates among soldiers ordered to do so supports this conclusion. As the enemy is dehumanized, the capacity for the combatant to accept an order even to commit an atrocity – to kill an entire village of civilians – becomes more palatable.

³⁸⁴ Hendon and Haas, "Suicide and Guilt as Manifestations of PTSD in Vietnam Combat Veterans," 590.

comrades for which the veteran feels responsible, guilty, and shameful and this psychological weight binds his willing in a self-destructive trajectory.

While these are the most acute cases of hopelessness and acute guilt and shame, there are certainly more diffuse cases that are illuminated using the Augustinian definition of moral injury that I have proposed. As the realization dawns that one's moral orientation, to which one commits or has committed his or her willing, is aligned toward a "good" that is false, a veteran may come to reflect in a more cynical way about the future itself. Attempting to live into the identity that Tick proposes, that of a "truth-teller" and elder of the community whose experience of war is valuable and worthy of communication to society at large, the veteran may find it a hard sell. Psychologist James Hillman argues that PTSD as experienced en masse by scores of American veterans is, in fact, a distinctly American problem tied to "the endemic numbing of the American homeland and its addiction to security."³⁸⁵ As a result of this addiction, our society upholds the "good" of military conquest and war both overtly and subtly in myriad diffuse ways. Tick notes (and I have argued similarly in chapter 3) that "our entertainment-driven consumer society markets empty icons of the war experience. We turn camouflage into a clothing style and sell toy replicas of advanced weaponry."³⁸⁶ The larger force of "consumer patriotism" deeply affects the culture's moral values, and one who speaks against the conditioning power of this force certainly will face resistance and risk judgment about his own moral character. While one suffering from a lower-intensity form of moral injury than those who killed in a "berserk" rage may not contend with the crushing guilt and suicidal ideation that evince a deep hopelessness, the encounter with

³⁸⁵ James Hillman, *A Terrible Love of War*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 31.

³⁸⁶ Tick, *War and the Soul*, 244.

the intractable and ubiquitous force of “consumer patriotism” and its profound influence on axiological orientations in contemporary America may certain damage his capacity to imagine a hopeful future in which violence does not dominate the cultural consciousness.

Sin as Condition of Hopelessness

Jurgen Moltmann, the renowned German theologian who narrowly survived the allied firebombing at Dresden as a German army auxiliary, argues that an aspect of the original sin passed to humanity from Adam is an attitude and orientation of despair. While many follow Augustine in naming “pride” as the original form of sin in human action, Moltmann argues that “the other side of such pride is hopelessness, resignation, inertia and melancholy.”³⁸⁷ For Moltmann, the promise of God through the resurrection lies in its radical hope, which contradicts the seemingly inescapable realities of the present situation, which we experience intensely in death, suffering and misery. In fact, he argues, hope means nothing at all if it does not first deal with the reality of death and the extreme violence and brokenness of humanity. Echoing Augustine, Moltmann conceives of resurrection hope as exactly the inbreaking divine action that enables us to re-orient our lives toward that which is truly good. It is that which is able to pierce the impenetrable condition of brokenness under which humanity labors, spanning “the horizons which then open over a closed existence.”³⁸⁸ For Moltmann, the resurrection means that the forces that seemingly “close the book” on lives, movements and hopes for the future do not, in fact do so. In light of the Christ that overcame death, death’s

³⁸⁷ Jurgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991), 22.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

capacity to close off the meaning and purpose of a life is negated, and its capacity to render actions and purposes meaningless is annulled.

In light of this one, true hope and the eschatological promise of God of life beyond death that is glimpsed in the resurrection, to fear and to despair is to refuse to believe and thus to sin. Moltmann presents a picture of hopelessness as an active refusal to embrace the hope offered and to therefore to act as if the powers that condition human existence in the present have ultimate authority and exercise total and enduring control over human destiny. Yet he also presents existential despair as the condition in which humanity finds itself in the present, quoting John Calvin's claim that "we are surrounded by decay" and "oppressed by ineffable misery."³⁸⁹ Our experiences in this world are that of death, real guilt and deep human suffering "to which there is no ready-made answer."³⁹⁰ Hopelessness is not an irrational or absurd response to our situation, but one that reflects a true and honest engagement with the realities of the world, of our orientations and trajectories apart from the grace of God. To interpret Moltmann through McFadyen's schema, when we apply our personal energies to this condition of hopelessness, we begin to despair and to act and become oriented in ways that reflect a grim view that habitually limits our view of the future of our human condition.

Moltmann articulates an almost dichotomous view of sin and hope, of a world of death and guilt on the one hand and of life and renewal on the other, that resonates with the condition of those who have suffered trauma. As Shelly Rambo writes, those who have been impacted strongly by death enter a psychological liminal space, between the experience of "a radical ending past which it is difficult, if not impossible, to conceive of

³⁸⁹ Ibid., 19.

³⁹⁰ Ibid.

life,” and future living.³⁹¹ What those studying combat trauma in particular would refer to as the “death imprint” – the close encounter with death – Rambo notes is “always here,” present in the psyche for those who have experienced it and they are trapped in a situation from which they cannot make further meaning. For those experiencing moral injury, who have committed their active energies to the enterprise of warfare and understand it to be a false good, what is also “always here” is their guilty identity. For those who have direct experiences of combat and find themselves “made into murderers,” that identity is always present and serves as a major impediment towards envisioning a hopeful future, as any guilt-free future would involve altering this guilty identity. For those who have experienced a lower-intensity version of moral injury, hopelessness may still be found in the distorted, guilty identity that one has participated in and this guilt damages their capacity to envision a guilt-free future.

Moltmann’s own profound personal experience of guilt certainly informed his articulation of human brokenness, and as such his conception of the boundary between hope and despair holds descriptive power for those who experience moral injury and distorted identity. He was drafted from the Air Force auxiliary into the regular German Army in 1944 and sent to the front, where he surrendered in 1945 to British troops. He was held in allied rehabilitation camps until 1948, and in those camps he was forced to confront the realities of the “final solution.” In his autobiography, he reports being utterly stricken with guilt and horror as he and his fellow German prisoners were made to view pictures of the concentration camps at Belsen and Buchenwald. He notes that while some struggled to accept the veracity of the images, “slowly and inexorably the truth seeped into our consciousness, and we saw ourselves through the eyes of the Nazi

³⁹¹ Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 4.

victims.”³⁹² He connects a sense of personal and communal despair with deep guilt in conveying his sense that “depression over the wartime destruction and a captivity with no end in sight was compounded by a feeling of profound shame at having to share in shouldering the disgrace of one’s own people.”³⁹³

Writing *Theology of Hope* over two decades later, Moltmann notes that despair is a feeling that is predicated on some vision of life, of what it looks like. In his words, despair “presupposes hope,” and he quotes Augustine’s dictum that “what we do not long for, can be the object neither of our hope nor of our despair.”³⁹⁴ In other words, despair only is possible if one can envision what a proper life would be like. The guilty memory of the one who has experienced moral injury breeds a particular kind of despair, namely that there is indeed a life that can be glimpsed, but the morally injured believe that they (and perhaps even the world) are too broken for it to apply in any way to *their* future. Moltmann embraced Christianity in the camp, and in his view this provided the vision of hope in the Christ who forgave his own abusers and deserters. Conversely, however, his view of the reality of human life apart from the hope of the gospel and the resurrection is one of utter hopelessness and brokenness. So much so that given the experience of human brokenness that he and other veterans of war have experienced, it follows from his conception of hope that the only authentic reaction to the encounter with extreme human brokenness is to lose hope and despair utterly for the human condition. Their guilt and the malformation of their identity is haunting and gut-wrenching precisely because it does not occur against the imaginative backdrop of complete moral greyness, but because so

³⁹² Jurgen Moltmann, *A Broad Place: An Autobiography*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008), 8.

³⁹³ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁴ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 23.

many veterans believe that they *should* be other than they are. As Tick argues, veterans enter service with a vision of a mythic warrior, and then utterly fail to fulfill that identity, incurring an increasing sense of guilt and shame as their malformed identities becomes less and less like the ideal they envision as ultimately “good.” An ideal is there, perhaps even notions of justice and hope, yet as Moltmann argues, the problem is that “no way opens up towards its fulfillment.”³⁹⁵

Sin, Guilt and Blame

I have argued to this point in this chapter that sin has the capacity to powerfully name the brokenness at the heart of the experience of combat trauma in terms of traumatic memory and the general expression of hopelessness for the future. Yet the themes of guilt and blame feature prominently in the discussion of both of these pathologies and deserve further attention. If the doctrine of original sin I have proposed is to hold explanatory value, then perhaps its greatest contribution to an understanding of trauma and wartime violence is its nuanced valuation of guilt, blame and responsibility. These threads have been woven through previous chapters, but here I will attempt to clarify the relationship between guilt and the ability to will otherwise, the importance of the universality of guilt as it relates to the experience of brokenness, and, finally, the ways in which a more nuanced understanding of the forces of guilt and blame may provide a way of healing traumatic memory.

³⁹⁵ Ibid.

Resistance and the Illusion of Dissent

While the radical power of the force of sin to direct willing provides a framework for understanding the limited options available to those bound in pathological situations, perhaps the most salient aspect of an Augustinian view of sin and will to this study is its relationship to morality in terms of guilt. As I argued in the introduction, a major problem present in the guiding ideologies of our society is the essentialization of legal categories of “innocence” and “guilt” in order to avoid the crushing psychological burden of blameworthiness. This burden, as I have argued in this chapter, is borne in a particularly acute way by many of our nation’s veterans. The intense experience of guilt and shame is linked directly to the veteran’s understanding that he or she deserves blame and therefore punishment for the action he or she has committed.³⁹⁶ The profound feeling of guilt as blameworthiness conditions both the traumatic experience that cannot be categorized into the mind’s system of memory and meaning-making, as well as the hopelessness that is borne by those who cannot envision a future devoid of blame and punishment.

A great deal of this experience of guilt involves the fact that combatants operate with the implicit understanding that individuals are morally autonomous. This understanding resonates with an essentially Pelagian understanding of the freedom of the will. More precisely, it involves the belief – primarily on the part of the combatant or veteran – that he or she could always have chosen otherwise when faced with the actions he or she took. For Pelagius, it was critical that we were capable of willing rightly and doing good at all times, as only then could our failures be counted against us as guilt.

³⁹⁶ Hendon and Haas, “Suicide and Guilt as Manifestations of PTSD in Vietnam Combat Veterans,” 590. This study connotes exactly this – that along with feelings of hopelessness and guilt, many suicidal veterans also believed that they deserved to be punished.

Even when there are critical factors that may influence our willing, according to Pelagius we are always able to transcend those factors – the “good” choice is always available to us. The U.S. military ethos is predicated on the highest notions of personal responsibility, individual bravery and honor. The Code of Conduct, which can be viewed as a concise ethical guide to military behavior in combat, concludes with the reminder that each combatant is responsible for his or her own actions. The ethical guide and training ethos create the powerful idea that there is always an honorable choice available, and military members are explicitly instructed to refuse orders they understand to be “illegal or immoral” based on the U.S. Code of Military Justice and the Geneva conventions. The clear implication in this instruction is that one is always able to understand an order to be illegal or immoral and that one always has the ability to exercise an option to resist.

It follows that against this backdrop, veteran guilt is connected with the belief on their part that they could have acted other than they did in critical moments. As already noted, Hendon and Haas’ study on guilt and killing notes that those who were out of control when they killed experienced demonstrably higher rates of suicide than those who did it while more rationally responding or following orders. This could be interpreted to suggest that those who felt “out of control” when they killed others feel more guilt because they feel that they should have been able to control themselves. This seems akin to a lower-impact situation in which a person says something in anger that she regrets and then feels guilty because she should have been able to control her temper – precisely because she does exercise control over her temper and emotions the majority of the time. Edward Tick argues that a large part of the identity crisis of guilt and shame veterans

encounter is due to their failure to live up to the warrior ideal they envision. What is critical is not that the ideal is unrealistic, but that veterans themselves believe it to be attainable and measure their own actions against it, as though there are honorable and heroic choices available that they simply didn't have the courage to take. Grossman himself, even while recognizing and detailing the forces that constrain willing and make dissent nearly impossible in situations in which one is ordered to kill noncombatants, hails the "remarkable moral fiber" of those who are able to refuse to participate in the act.³⁹⁷ This tacitly reflects the Pelagian view that while these individuals experienced and felt the social and hierarchical pressures on their willing, they were capable of transcending them and accessing a "good" moral choice. Framed in this way, those who are unable to do so, despite whatever impossible situation they are placed in, necessarily must understand themselves of being guilty of not making that choice.

Multiple figures from Milgram to Shay to Grossman himself provide myriad psychological evidence that morally "good" choices are rarely available on the battlefield for varying reasons. While some situations may exist in which one has a chance to consider the order before following, many times one has to react in a particular situation to a more general set of instructions. Here, the reflexive conditioning that Grossman describes becomes critical – the ingrained capacity to "shoot first" when viscerally assessing a level of enemy threat bypasses the entire decision-making system of the brain. The choice to "not fire" is in this case quite literally not available to the consciousness. Yet more generally, the forces of war so distort the combatant's sense of "good" that a truly "good" moral choice may seem to be a moral ill: moral realities are confused. For

³⁹⁷ Grossman, *On Killing*, 224.

example, one could argue that even those who have gone into a “berserk” state do so out of a sense of moral righteousness or indignation – their friend has been unjustly killed and justice must be done on their behalf. Quoting an interview with a participant in the infamous My Lai massacre in Vietnam, Milgram notes this very sense of moral justice. When asked why the participant killed men, women and children, he responded that not only had he been ordered to, but that “at the time I felt like I was doing the right thing, because...I lost buddies.”³⁹⁸ In McFadyen’s terms, the horizons of choice have certainly been narrowed, as outright resistance and dissent may not be available. This does not mean that there are not choices that incur greater and lesser degrees of guilt. Certainly these minor choices exist, but they must be understood to exist in the primary capacity of subterfuge, of doing one’s best to minimize the impact of one’s aggressive actions, even as one does them.³⁹⁹

Given the dichotomy between the internalized belief in moral autonomy and the lived experiences of the veteran amidst the forces of war, a Pelagian morality based on human autonomy not only fails to accurately describe the complexities of psychology in combat, but also becomes itself a pathogenic force within the psyche. One of Augustine’s primary complaints against the Pelagian conception of human willing was that it created an untenable moralism, absolutizing blame for human actions and attributing responsibility to humanity for its own righteousness. In terms of the situation of combat

³⁹⁸ Milgram, *Obedience to Authority*, 185.

³⁹⁹ It is worth mentioning that it may be that a more consequentialist view of morality would also make the seemingly simple “moral heroes” Grossman describes considerably less so. Grossman valorizes those who, in one situation, stepped out of their formation and refused their commander’s order to kill civilians. These resisters were summarily executed on the commander’s orders moments later, and the other members of the unit carried out the original order. It is possible that the less morally corrosive choice would actually be to engage in some form of subterfuge, like shooting civilians in non-life threatening areas in order to actually give them the greatest chance of survival. Striving to be morally exemplary is again problematic as the forces of war also prey upon those very desires.

willing, the Pelagian system suffers from the same problem: its ubiquity in modern society and its acceptance by combatants makes it harmful in its absolutization of moral guilt. It is false precisely because it cannot account for the factors that have been shown by psychologists to affect human willing and assumes incorrectly that “good” moral choices are available in any situation to anyone. It is pathogenic because it engenders absolute feelings of guilt and shame for acts that have complex essential causes and attributes blame *in toto* to individuals who are caught in a profoundly complex web of responsibility, agency and culpability without any attention to the interconnections that define those individuals.

Original Sin and Healing

Perhaps the primary benefit of the modified Augustinian conception of original sin I have proposed is that it offers a more complex moral system that holds individuals accountable for moral action without absolutizing their responsibility. It argues that because we share a human nature that is congenitally damaged and the force of sin conditions our very sense of what is “good,” all humanity is bound in a condition of universal sinfulness. It is impossible for any individual to escape this condition and all humanity is disfigured and corrupted by the collective commitments of personal energies to the pursuit of distorted goods. As such, any individual human action is not merely influenced, but actually constricted by the situation in which he or she finds himself amid the forces of human nature and civilization. A critical point, then, is that our willing is not individually self-contained, but influenced by our collective broken and damaged nature. This influence, as I have argued throughout this study, primarily coalesces into

forces that fundamentally distort our conception of what is “good,” such that our moral options are never decisions of “good” or “bad” but of a range of greater and lesser “bad” options.

The malleability of our very notion of “good” presents a conception of guilt that is categorically different than the absolutized guilt present in any system that assumes complete human autonomy as the ground of human willing. The problem is that not only is a truly “good” choice not truly available, but that our sense of “good” is so distorted that in claiming a false and distorted “good” as absolute, we are capable of truly believing that we are “doing good” in pursuing it. This is precisely the power of the force of sin: as McFadyen argues, it confuses our sense of morality and effectively orients it in corrupted directions. It is predicated on the fact that as moral agents, we act in pursuit of desire for what we believe to be good. Thus, it is not as though the person is necessarily making a choice that they know to be morally wrong, but rather that their very desire to do good, to be honorable is sequestered into a limited horizon of greater and lesser wrongs. The critical point is that this understanding complicates the determination of axiological value for any action taken by an individual person. A deontological ethical system, for example, would argue that it is primarily one’s intent that matters when determining whether someone has acted “rightly” or “wrongly” in any situation. Yet within the understanding of original sin and distorted willing, it is entirely possible to examine a hideous act of wartime violence and answer that someone acted with intent to pursue what he understood to be truly “good.” In what way, then is the person who committed this act guilty and therefore blameworthy?

The concept of original sin offers a different path – it contends that individuals are congenitally guilty by inheriting this damaged human nature and the concomitant forces of civilization that so distort human willing as well as by the commitment of one’s own personal energies in pursuit of a distorted good. This dual aspect of human guilt is critical, as it affirms that an individual retains responsibility for his or her own actions, yet responsibility does not rest *solely* upon that individual. It recognizes the complex web of human relationality and the ways in which social and psychological pressures create the situations and environments from which individual actions occur. These situations and environments are constitutive of our human nature and are thus inescapable. Naming “sin” as the nature and situation in which we find ourselves helps us to recognize the wrongness and brokenness of the world and refuses to allow us to call it “good.” Yet it also recognizes that our inescapable participation in it as human beings prevents us from being called “good” either. Both our constitutive existence within this broken nature and our actions that inevitably arise from it make us guilty. While the universality of sin so described raises immediate questions about the relation between guilt and blame, what it certainly does is argue that individual actions cannot be judged as “guilty” apart from the context from which they arise.

This holds particular explanatory power in terms of the situation of veteran guilt in that it contextualizes their guilt in a particular way without dismissing it. The phrase “its not your fault” is often spoken by therapists to those who have suffered significant trauma and whose life-intentionality has been subsequently distorted. Recounting his conscription into the Sierra Leone civil war as a child soldier after the death of his parents and the majority of his local village, Ishmael Beah notes that when he heard this phrase

spoken to him by the UN workers when he finally arrived at a rehabilitation facility, he despised it. It didn't reflect the reality of his own sense of personal accountability and identity or his inner sense of guilt at the violence he had done. It seems unlikely that veterans would react any better to the phrase, which would likely chafe against them for the same reasons. No veteran experiencing intense guilt for the act of killing or participating in killing would relate to the phrase, for to do so would suggest that they had no active agency. Such an implication would ring untrue to them and would also be contrary to the moral logic of the modified concept of original sin that I am proposing. This concept does not hold that it is not one's fault that he or she committed individually sinful and violent actions – indeed, when one commits one's action toward a distorted good, one commits sin. It does hold, however, that it is not *entirely* the individual's fault. This perhaps provides a small, yet significant amount of “breathing room” that recognizes the veteran's complicity in a terrible action while simultaneously recognizing the power of the forces that conditioned it. It also can trace the path of the distortion in the combatant's willing and the way his own continually functioning sense of honor is abused and sequestered.

For veterans on the edge of despair and totalizing hopelessness, the ability to speak of their situation in an honest and sober way while suggesting that they are not entirely responsible for their behavior may be the difference between suicide and the beginnings of the construction of a future that is worth living. The manner in which original sin informs the understanding of moral injury as a category of human experience allows both for the recognition of guilt and for the specific naming of the forces which

shape and constrain willing in combat situations.⁴⁰⁰ The very ability to name these forces as “sinful” and those that deepen human brokenness in the world identifies a potential purpose for veterans – to struggle against these forces and to name them in the public arena.⁴⁰¹ In this way, veterans can potentially live into the role of the “truth teller” that Tick describes and find purpose in passing experience and wisdom on to society at large. It is important to note, however, that this may involve rejecting the idea of the “mythic warrior” altogether and recognizing that this construction is precisely one that distorts our sense of good. Less than living into or realizing some identity involved in it, the veteran who is able to name these forces warns about the very notion of the “mythic warrior,” the force of obedience to sequester one’s willing, the capacity of the predominant mythology of American exceptionalism to dehumanize those deemed as dangerous, and the myriad other battlefield pressures that condition one to accept killing and violence as not simply necessary but morally “good.” These ideas do not certainly constitute a therapeutic “magic bullet” - the clear and unequivocal cerebral answer to moral pain and trauma - but perhaps they may serve as a conceptual tool that may be used to help therapists, researchers and veterans realistically envision a meaningful future in which some seed of hope may germinate.

The more complex moral framework may also provide a way in which guilty traumatic memories may be contextualized and re-imagined that is faithful both to the rights of the victim and to the recovery of the combatant. Van der Kolk and van der Hart

⁴⁰⁰ This term is certainly not exclusive to combat trauma and the forces that shape moral choices there, though it was originally employed to describe the axiological component of PTSD resulting from the combat environment. It is particularly apt to describe varying kinds of perpetrator trauma and different researchers are currently working out its application in wider arenas of experience.

⁴⁰¹ In *Soul Repair: Recovering from Moral Injury after War* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), Rita Brock and Gabriella Lettini narrate the stories of several veterans who have experienced a similar sense of renewed life and purpose in speaking out against aspects of the way we conduct war based on their own experiences.

suggest that traumatic memories involving guilt and shame are the most intractable and most strongly resist flexibility and incorporation into the mind's normal system of meaning-making. Yet the treatment that they suggest for other patients, the suggestion of "a less negative of even a positive scenario" is fraught with ethical issues, particularly for veterans whose trauma involves their own actions of violence against others.⁴⁰² Is it morally proper to alter the memory of a violent act in order that its perpetrator's guilt can be lessened and his moral culpability eased? This seems to ameliorate the guilt of the perpetrator at the expense of the victim as well as the truth. However, perhaps the more complex notion of morality found in the Augustinian conception of willing is able to provide a different solution. It is certainly less problematic to think that the "guilty" memory of a combat veteran could be ameliorated in a way that focused on the factors limiting his agency and sharing the responsibility for his actions. This neither changes the truth of the event, nor makes a claim that the actor has not committed his energies toward violent action, nor glosses over the suffering of the victim, but simply conveys to the veteran that the totality of guilt does rest solely upon his or her shoulders. Contextualized in this way, the memory may incorporate into a new schema of meaning wherein the veteran is able to recognize the power of those forces in shaping willing and perhaps even understand the role of resistance to them as a moral duty.

Universal Guilt: Not Blame Alone, but Grace

If this conception of sin is valuable in providing both a way of naming human brokenness that cuts through the essentialized moral conception of innocence we've

⁴⁰² van der Kolk and van der Hart, "The Intrusive Past," 178.

created and yet also corrects that absolutized notion of guilt that veterans experience, then questions still linger about the relationship between guilt and blame. From the Augustinian perspective, we incur guilt congenitally through our inheritance of a damaged human nature. In this study, I have attempted to examine the myriad ways in which our human nature is damaged and which powerful forces within our evolutionary biology, our civilization and our society all propagate that damage and distort our nature further. Yet it has also been my declared intention to reclaim the language of “sin” in a way that is meaningful and names that which is truly wrong and broken. This, almost by necessity means that there is some proper place for blame as it relates to the guilt associated with agents’ participation in such brokenness.

Certainly, in seeking to rehabilitate ability of the term “sin” to name the brokenness at the center of the human experience, this study has placed emphasis on the *force* of sin as blameworthy and lessened the emphasis upon the sinful actions and inactions of individuals that thereby make them active “sinners” as blameworthy. This is a necessary corrective for a society that has placed a great deal of its moral foundation on a false conception of human autonomy and therefore too much blame on individuals for particular actions taken. These forces condition a great deal of the way we think about ourselves, others and the relative values of all aspects of creation. Consequently, they form the very center of our conceptions of moral order. In the context of warfare and violence, it is certainly the case that these forces make the killing of other human beings desirable in order to achieve a particular end. Here a distinct tension emerges within an Augustinian conception of individual guilt and willing: to associate blame entirely with the force of sin and not at all with the individuals bound within it is to do violence to the

conception of the will as a manifestation of the individual's status as a moral agent. It would be to hold, in other words, that the individual has lost all identity as subject and is rendered pure object by the totalizing force. To hold the individual guilty but only the larger corrupting force as blameworthy appears to dissolve the tension between sin as *both* force and as individual act entirely at the expense of the latter. It would also seem to absolve those who commit heinous violence entirely of the blame – a version of “the devil made me do it” that denies their agency entirely.

On the other hand, the prevalence and power of the external conditioning forces to affect the will makes it difficult to establish criteria by which we can easily apportion degrees of blame among the guilty. While guilt may be universal, it is the case that combatants experience this guilt and distortion in an acute way. They witness and participate in war - the place where the fabric of humanity is rent beyond repair and bear this brokenness in guilt and shame that deeply distort their own selves and propagate it to others in terms of secondary traumatizations and violent behavior. They are certainly and undeniably complicit in participating in great violence and visiting it upon others and bear the guilt of the greater societal forces in a particular and unique way. They kill and are the instruments of a dehumanizing force that is propagated by all of humanity in general and more particularly by our American society. Yet is their “acute” guilt categorically different than the civilian who enjoys, patronizes and supports war films that extol American exceptionalism, who buys camouflage clothing for his children and who supports war efforts with the power of his vote? If the driving factor is the conditioning force of sin that distorts all actors from voters to politicians to military leaders to filmmakers to advertisers to corporations, then it seems untenable to hold one

member of this society more blameworthy than another simply by virtue of the role he or she may play and the actions that he or she is compelled to do in service to the overall societal “good.”⁴⁰³

Placed within its proper theological context, however, the Augustinian revision of the doctrine of sin is less concerned with the attribution of individual blame than it is with illuminating the human condition in which grace and salvation are urgently necessary. Augustine conceptualized the radical, inescapable universality of human sin with an eye toward salvation, not, as McFarland argues, with “a sadistic enthusiasm for belittling human beings.”⁴⁰⁴ Augustine was concerned that the system established by Pelagius created a significant amount of stress upon people, who had to worry whether they were worthy of God’s grace based on their “individual merits.”⁴⁰⁵ By arguing that sin is radical and universal, Augustine calms this anxiety in a seemingly strange way, articulating that all stand guilty before God and none merit God’s grace in a contest of axiological value. Grace can only be understood against this backdrop. As McFarland contends, the role of the doctrine of sin is not anthropocentric: its purpose “should not be to focus attention on ourselves as good or bad, but on God.”⁴⁰⁶ If this is so, then the doctrine of sin should focus us on God’s response to the situation of human brokenness and guilt. Indeed, Augustine’s conception is centered on the gracious character of God, and his exhortations

⁴⁰³ What cannot be lost in this discussion that focuses primarily on those who perpetrate acts of violence are the victims of that violence. It deserves to be said that what I am proposing in no way is meant to excuse or condone violent actions or to ignore the pain and suffering of the victims of rape, killing and all manner of war violence. It is, however, meant to identify the root causes of the brokenness that threatens to propagate and further enable these violent acts in order that they not continue to happen.

⁴⁰⁴ McFarland, *In Adam’s Fall*, 46. As McFarland argues further, however, Augustine does propose that the congenital guilt of humanity does mean that all human beings deserve to suffer. This is a theological conclusion that McFarland and many other scholars (including myself) find untenable and quite harmful in describing the world today.

⁴⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

in the anti-Pelagian writings often frame the entire discussion of human willing and sinfulness in terms of a defense of the fullness of God's entirely unmerited grace and forgiveness through Jesus Christ as healing response to the condition of human sinfulness.⁴⁰⁷

If one aspect of the explanatory power of the modified conception of original sin I have proposed is that it provides a framework by which we can more authentically understand human brokenness, then another pivotal aspect is the pathway to veteran healing it provides through a more graceful moral order. Given the forces that constrict the willing of combatants, this study strongly argues against simple moral condemnations even of those combatants who have acted with extreme violence in combat. In this chapter I have attempted to elucidate the ways in which the doctrine of sin may provide small measures of grace that may have real import in healing veterans suffering from severe guilt and shame. While some would contend that the conception of universal and congenital guilt dissolves the pillars that uphold moral order, it is my contention that it re-orientes it and emphasizes grace and forgiveness over (though not excluding) blame. While blame cannot and should not be abandoned as an ascription we apply to acts that we judge to be morally wrong, the forces that produce them or even the people who commit them, the doctrine of original sin does suggest that we apply it with a significant measure of grace and a fuller understanding of the conditions from which those acts arise. Given the distortion of our own sense of good that permeates our societal values, it encourages us to examine our collective axiological values and constructed systems of judgment with a great deal of suspicion rather than uncritical reverence. It should

⁴⁰⁷ Most notably in "On the Spirit and the Letter," as he repeatedly extolls the totality of grace in the early sections (4, 5, 7, 10, 12, 13).

encourage us to identify blameworthy forces, situations and institutions and to hold our allegiances to these lightly. In response to the God who, in spite of our sinfulness, guilt and blameworthiness, “values human life so highly as to guarantee in indefeasibly with God’s own life as given in Jesus Christ,” it makes the difficult demand that we approach our moral judgments – particularly regarding individual actors - with a posture of grace and an openness to the possibility of forgiveness.⁴⁰⁸

⁴⁰⁸ McFarland, *In Adam’s Fall*, 46. As Miroslav Volf notes also in *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), this is not a simple process, and there must be many conditions met on this side of the eschaton for forgiveness and reconciliation to be truly effected. Victims must name injustices and wrongs, and perpetrators must truly repent of them. Yet he argues that the posture toward and genuine desire for forgiveness and reconciliation is the call of the gospel, even in the most difficult of circumstances.

Bibliography

- Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Harcourt, 1968.
- Athanasius. *On the Incarnation*. Edited and Translated by a religious of C. S. M. V. Crestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir's Press, 1996.
- Augustine. *The City of God Against the Pagans*, edited and translated by R. W. Dyson. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- _____, "On the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins and the Baptism of Infants." In Vol. 5 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, edited by Philip Schaff. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004.
- _____, "On the Spirit and the Letter." In Vol. 5 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, edited by Philip Schaff. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004.
- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Ethics*. Edited by Clifford J. Green. Translated by Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West and Douglas W. Stott. Vol 6 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, edited by Wayne Whitson Floyd Jr. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009.
- Brock, Rita and Sabitini, Gabriella. *Soul Repair: Recovering from Moral Injury After War*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2012.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore, John's Hopkins University Press, 1996.
- Dekel, Rachel and Solomon, Zahaya. "Secondary Traumatization Among Wives of War Veterans with PTSD." In *Combat Stress Injury: Theory, Research and Management*, Edited by Charles Figley and William Nash. New York: Routledge, 2007.
- Farley, Wendy. *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion: A Contemporary Theodicy*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990.
- Felman, Shoshanna and Laub, Dori. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. New York: Routledge Press, 1992.
- Gabriel, Richard. *No More Heroes: Madness and Psychiatry in War*. New York: Hill and Wang Publishers, 1987.
- Girard, Rene. *Violence and the Sacred*. Translated by Patrick Gregory. Baltimore: John's Hopkins University Press, 1977.

- Gregory of Nyssa. "On the Making of Man." In *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, vol 5*, edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004.
- Grossman, Dave. *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*. New York: Back Bay Books, 1995.
- Hauerwas, Stanley. *War and the American Difference: Theological Reflections on Violence and National Identity*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic Publishing, 2011.
- Hendon, Herbert and Hass, Ann Pollinger. "Suicide and Guilt as Manifestations of PTSD in Vietnam Combat Veterans." *American Journal of Psychiatry* 148, vol. 5 (1991): 586-591.
- Hillman, James. *A Terrible Love of War*. New York: Penguin Press, 2004.
- Irenaeus. "Against Heresies." In Vol. 1 of *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994.
- Jakupcak, Matthew, Cook, Jessica, Imel, Zac, Fontana, Alan, Rosenheck, Robert and McFall, Miles. "PTSD as a Risk Factor for Suicidal Ideation in Iraq and Afghanistan War Veterans." *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 22 (2009): 303-306.
- Jones, Serene. *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.
- Keegan, John and Holmes, Richard. *Soldiers: A History of Men in Battle*. London: Hamilton Press, 1985.
- Lifton, R. J. "Understanding the traumatized self: Imagery, symbolization, and transformation." In *Human Adaptation to Extreme Stress*, edited by J.P Wilson, Z. Harel and B. Kahana. New York: Plenum Press, 1988.
- Litz, Brett T., Stein, Nathan, Delaney, Ellen, Lebowitz, Leslie, Nash, William P., Silva, Caroline, Maguen, Shira. "Moral Injury and Moral Repair in War Veterans: A Preliminary Model and Intervention Strategy." *Clinical Psychology Review* 29 (2009): 695-706.
- McFadyen, Alistair. *Bound to Sin: Abuse, Holocaust and the Christian Doctrine of Sin*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- McFarland, Ian A. *In Adam's Fall: A Meditation on the Christian Doctrine of Original Sin*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell Press, 2010.

- Milgram, Stanley. *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1974.
- Moltmann, Jurgen. *A Broad Place: An Autobiography*. Translated by Margaret Kohl. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008.
- _____, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*. Translated by Margaret Kohl. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996.
- _____, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*. Translated by Margaret Kohl. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991.
- Nash, William P. "Combat/Operational Stress Adaptations and Injuries" in *Combat Stress Injury: Theory, Research, and Management*, Eds. Charles R. Figley and William P. Nash. New York: Routledge, 2007.
- Northup, Solomon. *Twelve Years a Slave*. New York: Sterling Publishing Company, 2013.
- Origen. "De Principiis." In *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol 4, edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004.
- Park, Andrew Sung. *The Wounded Heart of God: The Asian Concept of Han and the Christian Doctrine of Sin*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993.
- Pelagius. "To Demetrias" In *The Letters of Pelagius and His Followers*, edited and translated by B. R. Rees. Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 1991.
- Rambo, Shelly. *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.
- Shay, Jonathan. *Achilles In Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*. New York: Scribner Press, 1994.
- _____, *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming*. New York: Scribner, 2002.
- Suchocki, Margaret. *The Fall to Violence: Original Sin in Relational Theology*. New York: Continuum Publishing, 1994.
- Tick, Edward. *War and the Soul: Healing our Nation's Veterans From Post-traumatic Stress Disorder*. Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 2005.
- Tirman, John. *The Deaths of Others: The Fate of Civilians in America's Wars*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Van der Kolk, Bessel and van der Hart, Onno. "The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma." In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, edited by Cathy Caruth. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.

Volf, Miroslav. *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996.

Williams, Rowan. *Being Christian: Baptism, Bible, Eucharist, Prayer*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2014.

_____, *The Truce of God*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2005.

_____, "Insubstantial Evil." In *Augustine and His Critics*, edited by Robert Dodaro and George Lawless. New York: Routledge Press, 2000.