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Moral Injury as a Precondition for Reconciliation: An Anthropology of Veterans' Lives and Peacemaking

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Abstract: In this article, I rely on religious existential philosophy to make sense of the moral restoration expressed by combat veterans who engage in reconciliation with former enemies after suffering from moral injury. Moral injury is the persistent feeling of having betrayed one's deepest moral values. Anthropological research and analyses of combat veterans' testimony suggest that moral injury may be associated with reconciliation, which is considered here as a manifestation of an inner transformation akin to existential philosophies of striving for moral authenticity. Specifically, it is argued that Thomas Merton's defense of living a morally authentic life, which constitutes a process of moving from spiritual woundedness to social engagement with the other, parallels the transition of combat veterans involved in postconflict reconciliation efforts. Given this correspondence, existential moral transformation is considered alongside the anthropology of peace for explaining moral injury as a precondition for reconciliation, notably after armed conflict.

Keywords: anthropology of peace; existentialism; moral anthropology; moral injury; reconciliation; Thomas Merton; transitional justice; veterans

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1. Introduction

A relatively understudied topic in contemporary debates on peacemaking is moral injury, a persistently overwhelming feeling of moral betrayal (Tao et al. 2023, pp. 1–2). Though each case varies, moral injury consistently involves cognitive dissonance and emotional despair—a schism between one's actions and one's deepest moral code—resulting in lasting psychosocial distress, which, if left untreated, can increase one's risk for suicide (Khan et al. 2023, p. 260). A decade of research on the topic has revealed that persons exposed to profound suffering, such as preventable, unjustifiable, or violent wrongdoing, are more likely than others to develop moral injury (e.g., Shay 2014; Webb et al. 2024). Demographically speaking, combat veterans ("veterans," henceforth) are at the highest risk due to their exposure to suffering in war (Schwartz et al. 2021; Tripp et al. 2016).

Yet we still know little about what exactly causes the apparently intractable wound to one's moral sense of self and how to treat it. Active areas of research thus focus on ground-level questions such as how moral injury develops, why it is difficult to heal, and why it varies between persons (e.g., Dursan and Watkins 2018; Emmerich 2022; Tao et al. 2023; Tuomisto and Roche 2018; Weiss et al. 2023). Moreover, most research centers less on moral injury itself and more on addressing the effects of moral injury such as how to reduce its associated pathological behaviors, including self-isolation, aggression, anxiety, existential crises, and suicide.

Ethnographers have taken a somewhat different approach by documenting the relative expression and interpretation of moral injury, and stressing that the phenomenon itself is context dependent and possibly even restricted to certain cultures (e.g., Eikenaar 2023; Mihailović et al. 2015; Okulate et al. 2021; La Fleur et al. 2020). This has prompted calls for more comparative and holistic research on interventions, as well as more qualitative accounts of what it is like to experience moral injury (Borges et al. 2023; Fantus et al.

2024; Hollis et al. 2023; Molendijk et al. 2022; Williamson et al. 2021). In line with these calls, the present article explores the moral restoration expressed by reconciling veterans across cultures.

As I explain below, I draw from my ethnographic fieldwork with survivors and combatants of the Yugoslav Wars in the Western Balkans as well as my participant observations of veterans involved in reconciliation to consider a rather unexplored observation. Around the world, veterans who were once former enemies have reconciled with one another at the grassroots level and thereby expressed feelings of transformation and restoration, raising an intriguing question. Presuming that such expressions are true, what is it about the process of reconciliation that facilitates healing? Is it in the fulfillment of reconciliation with the other (viz. a former enemy, victim, outsider, etc.)? Is it in the act of reaching out to the other, even if reconciliation is not fulfilled? Or is it somehow in the preconditions that precede reaching out to the other and reconciling?

I approach these questions by defending four tentative hypotheses within the framework of religious existential philosophy. Building on observations that moral injury is significant for transitional justice (e.g., Keenan et al. 2023; Meagher 2014; Murphy 2016; Papadopoulos 2020) and assuming that moral injury is a human response to moral betrayal, I take seriously veterans' claims about feeling morally restored by reconciliation. I then consider whether these expressions are engendered by the act of reconciliation itself or the process underlying it. Inferring that it is the underlying process, I turn to Thomas Merton's existential philosophy of moral transformation for explication. For many veterans, a key change for engaging in reconciliation and peacemaking involves moving from mindfulness or contemplative practices to having a mystical experience or a comparably significant life experience that disrupts destructive ways of thinking after war. Given the semblance of these to Merton's philosophy, I suggest that healing from a moral injury requires an existential moral transformation and movement toward reconciling with the other.

At the outset, it is important for me to stress that I do not intend to imply that treating moral injury necessarily requires reconciliation or that the process outlined here is the only path to healing. Rather, I wish to propose that we look at moral injury from a different perspective—one that considers an ethnographically informed possibility that does not fit easily within current therapeutic models. As a theoretical possibility, it of course depends on unforeseen contingencies, such as holding comorbidities constant or controlling for key life history events. Along these lines, I should also note that do not pretend to address every philosophical idea pertaining to religious existential philosophy. The complexities of Merton's ideas alone render such an exposition impossible. Still, there is much to learn from perspectives offered by veterans. My hope is that by applying a small number of Merton's concepts to veterans' accounts of moral restoration, this article contributes to the study of moral injury.

2. How Should We Perceive Moral Injury?

Moral injury, a term widely understood these days as a catch-all or fuzzy concept, describes a range of experiences from a lost sense for what is right and wrong (i.e., *moral disorientation*; see Litz et al. 2022; Powers 2017) to burnout among professionals such as military personnel, first-responders, and caregivers (i.e., *moral distress*; see Berdida and Grande 2023; Stanojević and Čartolovni 2022; Tao et al. 2023). Thus, the term "moral injury" has experienced concept creep and, because of its expansive usage, it remains an open question of how we should interpret it.

Conceptually speaking, talk of moral injury came about in the post-9/11 era when trauma studies shifted to treating posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among the 36% of veterans returning from Afghanistan and Iraq (Hearty 2023; Mackovich and Gersema 2021). By the mid 2000s, psychiatrists and chaplains working with these veterans reported that treatments for PTSD were not alleviating their postconflict distress (Currier et al. 2019). A growing number were instead suffering from lasting negative emotions associated with witnessing, failing to prevent, or participating in detrimental actions to others; a set of traits

that came to be described as *moral injury* (Litz et al. 2009, p. 695). Originally identified as a universal pathology (viz. based solely on identifiable expressions in world literature; see Koenig and Al Zaben 2021), moral injury was framed as a destructive behavior resulting from betraying one's core moral values (Wortmann et al. 2017, p. 249). Nowadays it is understood more broadly as suffering from intrapersonal or organizational moral betrayal, which in turn increases one's risk for self-isolation, substance abuse, homelessness, and suicide (Brémault-Phillips et al. 2022; Marvasti and Power 2016; McDaniel et al. 2023; Richardson et al. 2022; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs 2023).

Still, it is fair to say that we do not fully know what "moral injury" entails (Dursan and Watkins 2018, p. 121). For one thing, there is no single intervention strategy but an array of biomedical classifications for roughly describing associated traits, but these are far from predictive. As an illustration, moral injury is associated with PTSD, social isolation, and burnout, but the etiological agents of these do not predict moral injury nor do their associated therapies reverse morally injurious symptoms (Koenig and Al Zaben 2021; Koenig et al. 2020b). Another problem is that we do not know why moral injury varies among individuals, even when they are exposed to the same potentially morally injurious events (PMIEs; see Biscoe et al. 2023). We also do not understand how moral injury differs from clinical depression (Goldberg et al. 2024), an identity crisis (Cahil et al. 2024), and trauma exposure (Borges et al. 2023; Currier et al. 2019; Fani et al. 2021).

These epistemic gaps are often attributed to the definitional boundaries of moral injury getting overly stretched and fragmented into disciplinary research silos (Braxton 2021; Haslam et al. 2021). They are also evidence of the lack of interdisciplinary research and integrative care (e.g., Kelley et al. 2024). Above all, they point to the importance of reassessing first principles; chief among them is the perspective we take on what moral injury is (van Baarle and Molendijk 2021).

By far the most common perspective is to focus on the association of moral injury with mental health disorders, even though the former and latter are distinct classifications (Williamson et al. 2021, p. 1). This negative association nevertheless explains why many scholars and practitioners prioritize alleviating comorbid health outcomes. Those usually entail mental health disorders which are, after all, the most destructive aspect of moral injury.

In military studies, for instance, the disorder associated with moral injury is known as the impact of killing (IOK): an emotional distress that ensues after killing in war (for a review, see Burkman et al. 2022). To minimize IOK, soldiers are now encouraged to receive post-combat therapy (Maguen et al. 2017) and to share moral justifications for killing before combat missions with fellow soldiers (Molendijk 2023; Purcell et al. 2018). Many thinkers, however, object to prioritizing the minimization of IOK over treating the long-term effects of moral injury (Burkman et al. 2022).

The latter is prioritized in psychiatry where treatments involve reconciling cognitive dissonance and minimizing negative thought patterns (Brémault-Phillips et al. 2022; Papadopoulos 2020). Still, psychiatry, though highly impactful when combined with assertive social engagement (e.g., Guan et al. 2021), is often limited without integrating religion (Koenig et al. 2020a, p. 268). Given the benefits of incorporating religious practices, moral injury is now reframed in psychiatry as a spiritual wound (e.g., Davies 2023a, 2023b; Liebert 2019; Brémault-Phillips et al. 2022).

Yet the term "spiritual wound" remains largely the parlance of religious studies and chaplaincy, which promote humanizing perspectives despite prioritizing spiritual growth. This often entails rediscovering one's spiritual connection with the divine and one's soul (Hansen 2019; Brémault-Phillips et al. 2022). Granted, religion is not necessary in all treatments (Pyne et al. 2023), but it is critical for the spiritually inclined (Borges et al. 2022). Nonetheless, spiritual approaches have been criticized for prioritizing religious accountability over biopsychosocial needs (Pyne et al. 2023). Moreover, talk of "spiritual wounds" sometimes functions as a backdoor for naturalizing (American Protestant) Christian con-

ceptions of morality, which are highly context-specific and risk ethnocentrism if portrayed as universal (Callaghan 2023, p. 91).

Consequently, scholars have lamented an absence of holistic perspectives that investigate moral injury with respect to persons in cultures (Molendijk 2023). Exceptions include Molendijk's (2021, 2023) multisited ethnography of Dutch soldiers deployed to Afghanistan and Bosnia-Herzegovina, which found that moral injury depends on violent experiences during deployment but also the very politics of deployment, including popular perceptions of soldiers' behavior. Another exception is Webb's (2021) ethnographic interviews with U.S. veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. Like Molendijk, Webb (a veteran himself) found that postconflict suffering is linked to the enculturation of warriors, who require re-enculturation into civilian life after war (see also Webb 2020). But without cultural innovations that help veterans navigate cultural thresholds, mitigating moral wounds is ultimately left to individual veterans to discover for themselves (Webb 2021, p. 557).

Further complicating our lack of understanding is the fact that most research on moral injury is survey based (Barr et al. 2022). These survey-based studies tend to investigate whether a hypothesized treatment or method for detecting moral injury is an improvement over others (Borges et al. 2023; Held et al. 2019). In sum, most research does not include the voices of the morally injured, prizes instruments that pathologize, and reduces moral injury to associated disorders requiring biomedical intervention.

This study breaks from these approaches by taking an ethnographically informed perspective driven by the following speculations. What if we reframe moral injury as a culturally relative response to moral betrayal? What if, rather than deducing hypotheses from extant theories in psychology, we worked inductively by learning from persons who have suffered and possibly recovered from moral injury? And what if we attempted to make sense of their recoveries based on models that cohere with their accounts even if those models do not align with current perspectives?

Before taking up the second and third inquiries, I address the first here by postulating a working definition (based on a combination of biopsychosocial and religious perspectives of mostly WEIRD, that is, Western, English-speaking, industrial, rich, democratic, populations; see Adams 2022; Litz et al. 2009, 2022; Molendijk 2021, 2023; Webb 2021). *Moral injury* is a culturally relative response to moral betrayal, or the experience of believing one has or shares moral values with others that are contradicted by actions with which one is directly involved or by which one is strongly affected, resulting in enduring emotional distress. This distress often includes recurrent feelings of guilt, shame, anger, or distrust that may be accompanied by hyperactivity of the nervous system or negative thoughts about oneself, others, or the social institutions where the distress originated. Because the resulting moral injury is embodied, it requires treatments that have global effects on the individual, ranging from experiences of self-transformation to recognizable transitions from one social identity or state of being to another.

3. Starting with the Informed Insider

Taking an anthropological perspective, my starting point is to listen to the informed insider, namely, the veteran who has recovered from moral injury; a perspective that is surprisingly absent from many studies. Of course, the skeptic may say that I am begging the question of whether there are, in fact, such veterans—a valid but defeasible objection. There is an expanding literature on veterans' first-hand accounts of recovery (Brock and Lettini 2012; Buechner 2020; Hijazi et al. 2015; Tick 2014; Wood 2016). These include giving new meanings to moral wounds through storytelling, processing traumatic memories with fellow veterans, experiencing forgiveness, forging a new social identity, and critically reforming cultural institutions to restore veterans to civilian life. Based on my involvement in postconflict reconciliation in the Balkans (Kiper 2019), I wish to summarize insider narratives about moral restoration and offer my own participant-observations about the role of moral injury in postconflict reconciliation efforts.

3.1. Veterans of the Yugoslav Wars

From 2012 to 2016, I undertook ethnographic research with survivors and former combatants of the Yugoslav Wars (1991–2001) in prior combat regions of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, and Serbia (Kiper 2018, 2022). Working in eleven communities, as well as within the respective national network of each country's veterans organizations, I documented people's wartime memories and postconflict experiences. Altogether, my ethnographic interviews (n = 139) and survey data (n = 780) offered insights into a variety of cultural perspectives on postconflict situations across the Western Balkans (Kiper 2018, 2022). In the process, I became an advocate for many of my informants, such as having the opportunity to participate in and observe the reconciliation efforts initiated by Serb and Bosnian veterans in 2016 (Kiper 2019).

After that period of time, I came to view many of my prior interviews and participant observations in a new light. I also came to understand the sociopolitical importance of grassroots veteran-to-veteran reconciliation and its connections to moral injury. Here, I offer a summary of these as post hoc ethnographic inferences, as opposed to a preconceived data collection since moral injury and veteran-to-veteran reconciliation were not part of my original research design. Thus, I do not aim to present these topics as systematic scientific findings but rather as observations based on ethnography and professional engagements that may contribute to future research.

Of my post hoc inferences, chief among them is that many veterans need to gain new perspectives about their wartime experiences, including their identity before and after the war, to move past longstanding feelings of postconflict distress. This often begins with an appreciation of how they and former enemies have changed since the war. It also involves identifying worldviews that contributed to moral injury and new outlooks that help to transform it.

For instance, many of the Balkan veterans I met looked back at their wartime selves as holding to a destructive form of patriotism that bordered on religious-like devotion to the nation, which contributed to moral betrayal. To illustrate, a Bosniak veteran summarized his pre-war feelings when speaking about the role of nationalist propaganda as "an intense ideology." "But right after the war," he added, "I lost that feeling and I felt a strong need to have a dialogue with my enemy. I needed to understand what happened." He thus travelled to former enemy territories, where he met with fellow veterans and developed new perspectives on himself and the other (Kiper 2018, pp. 240–41).

Equally as important, many veterans came to see one another as sharing the same postwar identity: not the identity of their previous ethnoreligious or national affiliation that drew them into conflict but their shared postconflict identity as veterans. The latter helped to bring them together on common ground. Years after the wars (and it is indeed an open question of just how much time is needed for postconflict reconciliation to occur), it became easier for veterans to share a postconflict identity across ethnoreligious and nationalist lines. By the 2010s, veterans organizations in the Western Balkans, if legitimate, had gained official recognition from the World Federation of Veterans (WFV), which required each to vet their ranks of war criminals. Afterwards, veterans could trust that recognized organizations in former enemy territories were comprised of ordinary men and women like themselves (Kiper 2015, 2018).

Adding to these perspectives, I found that transformative experiences likely contributed to reconciliation efforts. Many veterans described a period of suffering after war, such as struggling to establish a postconflict identity, adapting to changing social environments, and feeling demoralized by popular narratives about them. For many, a turning point came after hitting a bottom such as recognizing their drug or alcohol dependency, having suicidal tendencies, facing poverty, countenancing pleas for help from relatives, or having a religious-like experience (Kiper 2018, 2019). The latter was more common than not insofar as a critical change for many veterans came with a midlife crisis, near death experience, or breakthrough during a meditative task such as an activity conducive to mindfulness. Such experiences were described in conversations as bringing about new feel-

ings about the self or an identification with all of humanity that bordered on the "spiritual" or even mystical, since most veterans were skeptical of organized religion.

Regardless of their turning point, many veterans today share a similar perspective. Contrary to popular narratives that scapegoated them for the Yugoslav Wars, many grew to trust one another after the wars, provided their organization was a member of the WFV. Many also cooperated with war crimes investigators, advocated for human rights, and gave back to their local communities (Kiper 2015, 2019). With time, they began to focus less on the wrongdoing of the "other side" and more on the responsibilities of "our side." As a result, some developed a confessional attitude that aided their post-war recovery and functioned as a hard-to-fake signal of good will, which, in turn, invited good will from others, thus initiating a cycle of engaging in open dialogue and moving toward reconciliation efforts.

For example, a Serb veteran who was warmly embraced by others explained his change of heart to anyone who would listen. "In the war," he explained to me:

> I was part of the machine. I stopped thinking about everything, stopped thinking about what I was doing, because I couldn't. I was just doing what I was told. I was 18. I thought I was doing my part. I felt as if I had to. But in the war, I just wanted to save my life. . . . Our leaders led us into going to war. When it began again, they said we needed to fight again. I said 'no'. (see Kiper 2019)

This veteran was left dehumanized by combat. Yet he rediscovered his agency after war. I inferred from conversations that this mostly occurred through mindful day-to-day living and accepting the reality of the wars. Moreover, such transformations grew over time through open dialogue about shared veteran experiences.

Dialogues about postconflict experiences have had considerable effects on veterans. To illustrate, after meeting with former enemies, many were anecdotally more willing to forgive. One Bosniak veteran, for instance, expressed a counterintuitive relief in forgiving and working with veterans toward peace. He summarized his outlooks by saying:

> My advice, especially for young people, is that we need to forgive each other. We were attacked here but that doesn't change the importance of living in good relations with our neighbors. Life goes on and what happened, happened. Today is a new day . . . For there to be peace, you need to care for all of your neighbors, even more than your brother (see Kiper 2019).

Coming back to turning points, this veteran was moved by feelings of interconnectedness. Today, he advocates for building positive peace with neighbors to prevent future generations from suffering the tragedies of war.

One of the most remarkable veterans I met was Mile Milošević, president of the largest veterans organization in Serbia, who travelled throughout the region encouraging veterans to work together for peace. As he explained:

> To end the hostilities, for our children, we must reconcile—all veterans of the former Yugoslav republics. Veterans must now fight for peace. We have seen what war does. We still feel it in our skin. And we know that we must dissolve the centuries of hatreds, or politicians will continue to spread them. Politicians don't want to see reconciliation or peace. They want war because it keeps them in power. No one knows that better than a veteran. That is why all veterans need to fight together for peace (see Kiper 2019).

Granted, not all veterans support his cause, but a surprising number who do have found that working together, moving toward reconciliation, and healing go hand in hand. The natural consequence, as many conveyed to me, was to help others forgive and find closure.

For example, one Serb veteran reported that "Being a veteran, I'm against war and for peace. I believe that is only natural." Then, as if addressing his moral injury, he added that "I'm disappointed, yes, with politicians who started the wars. But I feel mostly sorrow now, for victims—all victims—and other veterans. I respect their veterans." Explaining that he may never fully recovered from his injuries, he defended his peacemaking, highlighting its

significance for his own postconflict recovery. "I would like to see more peace and dignity among people. I want to say, 'If we can reconcile, anyone can.' From what I understand, there are many veterans like us who feel that way" (Kiper 2019).

Indeed, veterans in the Western Balkans are not alone in reconciling with former enemies. And their accounts parallel the narratives of reconciling veterans of the Vietnam War. Hence, a brief look at their experiences corroborates the possibility of healing through reconciliation or vice versa.

3.2. Veterans of the Vietnam War

Similar to veterans of the Western Balkans, U.S. veterans of the Vietnam War have journeyed to former warzones in Vietnam where they have reconciled, experienced moral restoration, and advocated for peace. Julie Sullivan (2010), for instance, quotes a U.S. veteran who said the following after reconciling with Vietnamese veterans:

> To heal you must first forgive . . . we veterans [must] lead the way to a new era of cooperation and peace . . . the problem has been when we try to sublimate [moral injury] or forget it. We have to deal with it. If the people who fought the war, who faced each other across the jungle or in combat, can get beyond that, then everyone else certainly can.

Given the striking similarity to the aforementioned accounts, such words indicate a profound possibility: that veterans around the world are experiencing, through the process of reconciliation, a way of healing their moral injury and engaging in peacemaking.

According to Harding (2016), veteran-to-veteran reconciliation occurs after a period of struggle, contemplation, and seeking by returning to former places of war. As with Balkan veterans, this postconflict seeking is experienced by Vietnam veterans as "spiritual" rather than bound to a religious tradition. U.S. veterans returning to Vietnam, for instance, described moral injury to Sullivan (2010) as "more a spiritual wound, or existential piece that goes beyond psychotherapy." Likewise, Hijazi et al. (2015) found that U.S. veterans required a spiritual journey for recovery because, as they explained it, moral injury was more about moral beliefs and finding meaning than a disease requiring biomedical intervention.

These accounts suggest that moral injury exists not only at the neurological level but primarily at the level of personhood, where:

> . . . deeply held beliefs spark a question [after war] for re-establishing meaning, reformulating shattered beliefs about goodness and one's worth, and seeking forgiveness from self and others, which is what may ultimately facilitate growth. (Hijazi et al. 2015, p. 395)

This does not mean that biopsychological constituents are not at work but that moral injury exists mostly as an existential pain at the level of personhood, that is, as involving a person's sense of self. Hence, treatments that center on conscious experiences and self-awareness, and not just induced changes to the brain through pharmaceuticals or psychoplastigens, are necessary for recovery.

Supporting these observations, Searcy (2021) describes moral injury as an existential pain and thus healing as an existential process where the need for renewal engenders reflective actions, leading to the forgiving embrace of a former enemy. That embrace, unlike any other treatment, does the something to heal the morally injured. He writes:

> I have seen American veterans encounter North Vietnamese, Viet Cong or South Vietnamese veterans for the first time, and weep in their arms as they tell us, "It's over, it was a long time ago. It was a tragedy and mistake by the U.S. government, but you did not make those decisions. It's not your fault. Today we are friends, brothers". (see Searcy 2021)

Reinforcing these views, a Vietnamese veteran who met with U.S. veterans told Thomas Fuller (2015), "I can feel the friendship." Feeling restored himself, he added that he felt morally healed because "we have closed the door on the past." Thus, as Fuller (2015)

explains, forgiveness and closure, which are most evident in post-conflict reconciliation, are often necessary for what moral injury ultimately requires: moral restoration.

4. Toward a Moral Anthropology of Veteran Healing

Based on these accounts, it is safe to say that veterans' perspectives contribute to what moral injury is and how to treat it. Respectively, it is a conscious experience involving personhood that is entangled with culture and belief, and treating it thus requires alternatives to most current forms of care such as having community support and transitional rites for veterans. But I would like to consider an additional possibility stemming from observations outlined in the last section. If reconciliation is associated with moral restoration, then the act of reconciling or the process of coming to engage in it may alleviate moral injury. Setting aside the direction of this relationship, veterans' accounts indicate that healing involves an existential struggle that is best described as "spiritual." Addressing that struggle in terms of theology is a concurrent development in applied spiritual care (e.g., Jobe 2022; Tietje and Morris 2023; Waller 2023; West and Cronshaw 2023). Yet we currently lack a theoretical frame outside of theology for moving observations about veterans' recoveries to testable hypotheses in the social sciences. Therefore, I attempt to find a middle ground in what follows between spiritual care and anthropology by describing veteran healing in terms of moral transformation in existential philosophy.

5. Transformations in the Religious Existential Philosophy of Thomas Merton

What we know from veterans with moral injury is that they struggle with postconflict anxieties, including lingering distress about perceived wrongdoing, life meaning, self-realization, and moral authenticity. Some express having healed from these wounds through reconciliation, which is framed retrospectively as the culmination of a spiritual struggle. Phenomenologically, veterans describe this struggle as "different in kind than any other human experience." It is like being "stuck in hell and awash in destruction and death" (Tick 2014, p. 144).

Remarkably, these accounts mirror struggles with moral authenticity in existential philosophy (e.g., Williams 2021). Further to the point, they sound uncannily similar to Thomas Merton's philosophy of moving from despair to moral restoration. Though not a veteran himself, Merton's struggles with perceived wrongdoing in early adulthood and his subsequent spiritual path demarcate four steps that parallel veterans' reports about healing moral injury.

Before outlining that path, allow me to say a few words about Merton. Born to American artists in Prades, France, Merton had an unusual childhood. After losing his mother and father as a boy, he grew up among extended relatives in Europe and the United States, whose influence convinced Merton to pursue a career as an intellectual. In his famous autobiographical text, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton describes his early adulthood as ultimately misguided. Believing he was doing the right thing, he found himself having taken the wrong lifepaths. The systems and institutions he so firmly trusted as a young man led him into transgressions, including abandoning a partner and child out of wedlock. Left empty and struggling with alcoholism, Merton said his life was without meaning and gave way to an existential crisis. After a religious experience, which is only hinted at in his writings, Merton became a Trappist monk at the Abbey of Gethsemani near Bardstown, Kentucky, where he served for the rest of his life. For a quarter of a century there, Merton authored over 70 books, many of which centered on moral authenticity and spiritual longings. He also became a social advocate who found retribution in contact with the other.

Merton's legacy extends far beyond my concerns in this article, and though he is remembered for numerous topics in Christian theology, I want to focus on his contemplations of moral despair. For in them we find steps for moving from moral woundedness to restoration. Thus, by tracing Merton's reflections, a working theory emerges for how

moral injury, as an existential crisis that borders on religious, spiritual, or mystical feelings of despair, can be transformed into compassionate social action.

5.1. The Need for Renewal, Mindfulness, and Intuitive Love

Before standing alongside Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. as a religious advocate for nonviolent resistance, Merton was a monk preoccupied with moral authenticity. Looking back on his struggles with moral betrayal, Merton (1985, 1999) asserted that attempting to heal existential wounds through diversions such as drugs, fickle self-help, reductive scientific explanations, or political escapism was delusional. Instead, one required moral transformation. Through reflection, Merton (2003) identified a process that moved him from betrayal toward compassionate courage to face and even embrace the other.

The first step was seeking self-renewal: to rediscover the "true self" by separating it from the "false self" (Merton 1961, 1968, 1992, 2003). The former is the authentic innermost core of a person's being, while the latter is an identity socially constructed by cultural institutions that, in the contemporary U.S., often reduce persons to consumers and cogs in sociopolitical machines (Merton 1959). For Merton, to find our true selves, we need to re-open our mind to see the world as we did as children—beautiful, wondrous, and full of possibility. More aptly put these days, we need to practice small acts of "mindfulness" to attune our senses to the world around us, thereby allowing for sensory enhancement and breaking free of the inner narratives of the false self (see also Nhat Hanh 2010).

In terms of cognitive science, such recentering through mindfulness—or creative flow-states—separates the narrative-self of our brain's default mode network (DMN) from our minimal-self (see also Letheby 2021). When this happens, our mind starts to "reset," such that the symbolic orientation and even the delusions of our narrative-self become weakened and our direct sensory experiences of the world and minimal-self become stronger (see also McGilchrist 2012). To be sure, recentering is not yet healing but rather engendering greater psychological flexibility.

For Merton recentering is a necessary condition for what he called the internal guidance of intuitive love, which constitutes a critical change in the spiritually wounded (Merton 1959, 1992, 2003). Intuitive love is "the logic of . . . experience itself," developing "the way a living organism grows: it spreads out towards what it loves, and is heliotropic, like a plant" (Merton 1959, p. 24). At first this intuition, which Merton described as the "poet's logic," feels counterintuitive, since it violates the delusional mechanistic objectivity of the false self. But with mindful childlike wonder for the world, intuitive love becomes our guiding "reason" for action, transforming like a seed in even the most polluted soil toward blooming or, for the spiritually wounded, from suffering to liberation.

When summarizing the importance of intuitive love for moral restoration, Merton offered a summary that captures what I heard from reconciling veterans. That one might compare the journey of spiritual healing to finding one's way in darkness. Merton said it was similar "to the journey of a car on a dark highway. The only way the driver can keep to the road is by using his headlights. So, in the mystical life," Merton wrote, "We drive by night. Nevertheless, [intuitive love] penetrates the darkness enough to show us a little of the road ahead" (Merton 2002, p. 114). Critically for Merton, it is by the light of intuitive love that we "interpret the signposts and make out the landmarks along our way" (Merton 2002, p. 114). Thus, healing a spiritual wound in Merton's philosophy begins with moment to moment mindfulness in the world, moving ever so slightly from total despair to moral restoration by intuitive love, from which the true self starts to find the groundwork for restoration.

5.2. The Critical Importance of Contemplative Practices

To maintain intuitive love, the spiritually wounded traveler must go deeper into the mind by developing a contemplative practice, much like an athlete in training. Defending the significance of solitude, such as time set aside for silent prayer or meditation, Merton asserted that contemplative practices were the common language for all religious

traditions—and thus the Rosetta Stone for spirituality (Merton 1965, 1968, 1973, 1992). Incorporating any one of them would help anyone cultivate their wellbeing (Merton 1961, 1968, 2003). While Merton himself is best known for promoting Buddhist and Taoist meditations within a Christian practice, he is less known for the critical reason he advocated for contemplative solitude. For Merton, meditation, repetitive prayer, or other reflective activities, such as retelling our experiences in the form of a meaningful story, were the means to healing spiritual wounds as well as protesting injustices.

To demonstrate this, consider Merton's own description of his contemplative practices. He called them "protests against the lies of politicians, propagandists, and agitators." For Merton spiritual health was not found in the collective practices of the church, which he argued was often aligned with forces of injustice and left him feeling morally betrayed. "It is true," he admitted, "that the faith in which I believe is also invoked by many who believe in war, believe in racial injustices, believe in self-righteous and lying forms of tyranny." Accordingly, Merton claimed that his meditations in solitude or flow-states were a 'protest' against institutions that left him morally betrayed and allowed him to maintain loving kindness (Merton 1968, p. 82).

Removing himself from social institutions and social pressures to hear the inner voice within was both protest and therapy. Besides his own spiritual wounds, Merton (1965) often felt betrayed by the Catholic Church and the Christian tradition, mainly for the perpetuation of injustices in twentieth century America. For his sanity, Merton, like reconciling veterans today, encouraged solitude—not loneliness—as a key to restoration. It is to have some activity to seperate the self from destructive systems, to shut out the noise of society, and turn down the pain it has left. It is to protest injustices and restore the self simultaneously through regular time for meditation, reflection, absorption, deep focus, or prayer.

5.3. Experiencing the Transformative Power of Ultimate Reality

For Merton, ever the student of interreligious dialogue, the spiritual breakthrough for any individual is mystical experience, whether spontaneous or induced. Mystical experience is the feeling of union with ultimate reality that goes beyond the limitations of language (Merton 1961, 1965, 1992). Merton described his own mystical experiences as ultimate reprieves from worldly worries, where "All problems are resolved, and everything is clear." Despite his devotion to Catholicism, he explained the transformative power of mystical experiences in Buddhist terminology, saying that in mysticism "all matter, all life is charged," and that "everything is emptiness, and everything is compassion" (Merton 1973, pp. 233–34). Such encounters were momentous for Merton's transformation. They left him refreshed, reassured that life had meaning, and filled with compassion (Merton 1981). Critically, feeling compassion for oneself and others was a sign of true restoration for Merton. "The whole idea of compassion," he wrote, "is based on a keen awareness of [ultimate reality]: the interdependence of all these living beings, which are all part of one another, and all involved in one another" (Merton 2008, p. 22).

Here is where I see extraordinary agreement with veterans engaged in reconciliation. Like Merton, many indicate that a charged life of compassion born out of significant post-war experiences leads to a deeper understanding of one's true self and its relation to others. In fact, many veterans claimed that their commitment to work together for peace stemmed from a transformative mystical-like experience or regenerative feelings of compassion, such as those felt during veteran-to-veteran forgiveness. Like Merton, many portrayed compassion as a necessary part of moral transformation since it allows one to appreciate interdependence (Merton 1961). For veterans that translated into appreciating that tomorrow's peace was necessary for their children and grandchildren but depended on today's peace between neighbors. Overcoming moral betrayal may therefore depend on experiencing a transformation that moves one toward compassion and breaks destructive narratives of the false self (see also Letheby 2021).

5.4. Engaging in Extraordinary and Everyday Peacemaking

Similar to Gandhi, Merton (1965) believed that breaking from the false self and toward the true self revealed deeper truths and led one to peacemaking. This is because reality is not encountered in words or formulas, but in the direct existential experience of life with others. The final step, then, in Merton's view of moral restoration is following intuitive love to encounters with the other and, through compassionate interaction, receiving feedback that moves one toward acts of justice (Merton 1961, 1968, 1992, 2008). For Merton, this process constituted a miracle. It healed humanity, created spaces for the sacred, and brought about the presence of the holy (Merton 1961). In sum, by coming into compassionate contact with the other, the love of the spiritually wounded has the power to melt obdurate hearts, heal enduring pains, and restore human relations to a state of peacefulness (Merton 1996, pp. 313–18, 325–29, 330, 345–56).

Merton's philosophy, though bordering on the mystical, is similar to what I observed among reconciling veterans. Moral restoration was experienced in their willingness to welcome their former enemies and through direct social interaction experience a profound sense of peace. Moreover, it was in small acts of compassion in their postconflict lives that led them to reconciling with former enemies, which brought about feelings of moral renewal.

Such accounts would not be a surprise for Merton. In his system of thought it is only through loving compassion—shared in the act of social engagement with others—that the spiritually wounded is rendered with feelings of worth:

> Our job is to love others without stopping to inquire whether or not they are worthy. That is not our business and, in fact, it is nobody's business. What we are asked to do is to love, and thus love itself will render both ourselves and our neighbors worthy if anything can. (as cited by Hand 2005, p. 180)

For Merton, healing comes with a sense of moral worth, but we cannot achieve that until we turn off the voice of judgment from our false self and follow the true self's need to connect with others. Hence, the culmination of moral authenticity and spiritual restoration—for the mystic, the spiritual seeker, and the spiritually wounded alike—is one and the same: to love and through love manifest peacefulness and its connection to the holy (Merton 1968).

6. Implications for Moral Anthropology and the Anthropology of Peace

If the pathway voiced by veterans parallels Merton's and leads from moral betrayal to restoration, it deserves consideration even if it defies current perspectives. Empirically, it remains to be seen whether seeking self-renewal, mindfulness, contemplative practices, and mystical experiences increase social engagements, reconciliation, and healing. My goal in this article was not to test this possibility but to offer ethnographic observations and theoretical foundations for it. To similar ends, I wish to highlight three additional takeaways for the anthropology of morality and peace.

First, neglecting the voices of veterans—or persons with moral injury—will leave us in the dark. The perspectives of reconciling veterans suggest that moral injury is not so much its associated disorders as it is a conscious experience at the level of personhood. Treating moral injury must therefore involve changes experienced by the sufferer. The changes identified by veterans lend themselves to Merton's path and may be induced by similar experiences such as giving new meanings to one's experiences through storytelling or even through psychedelic therapy (e.g., Katinka et al. 2023).

Second, investigating the moral injury of veterans across cultures will enhance our understanding of moral experiences and ways of restoring moral agency (e.g., Fassin 2012). Doing so would also provide insights for transitional justice. Postconflict ethnographies routinely find that top-down reconciliation efforts are forced onto communities and thus fail to achieve long-term peacebuilding (e.g., Wilson 2001). Those failures have prompted debates about alternative forms of reconciliation such as bottom-up initiatives supported by the local turn (e.g., Eltringham 2021). This study suggests that if moral injury is a

precondition for reconciliation, it may contribute to bottom-up, unforced postconflict reconciliation when combined with mindfulness and mystical experiences.

Third, most anthropologies of peace offer comparative analyses of cultural practices that contribute to conflict resolution (e.g., Fry 2013). Adding to the importance of cross-culturally informed peacemaking, Eltringham (2021) suggests that anthropologists should remain pragmatic and ontologically neutral in their approaches. Extending this prescription, the observations offered here suggest that peacemaking may sometimes involve existential, mystical or spiritual experiences. Given this much, the anthropology of peace should not preclude these experiences or similar theories because they do not easily fit into current paradigms, for as Merton (1959, 1961) observed the biggest human temptation is to settle for too little.

7. Conclusions

In this article, I drew from ethnographic and cross-cultural observations of veterans involved in postconflict reconciliation efforts to consider the relationship between moral injury and reconciliation. To frame these findings, I assumed that moral injury is a culturally relative response to moral betrayal. Like most studies in anthropology, I started with what key informants had to say about the phenomena—that is, what veterans express about moral injury and reconciliation. I then worked from these observations to theory. In Merton's religious existential philosophy, I found an account that resembled the experiences of reconciling veterans. From there, I argued that treating moral injury likely involves a process of regaining a sense of moral authenticity, ranging from engaging in contemplative practices to having significant post-war life experiences and moving toward reconciling with the other. When these steps are taken, moral restoration is possible. This is not to say that reconciliation is a teleological outcome of moral injury but rather a potential consequence of moral restoration for which moral injury is a significant precondition.

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