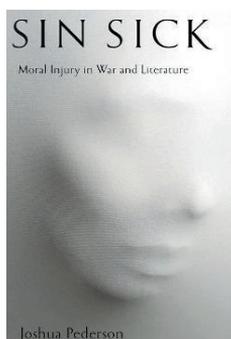




SIN SICK: MORAL INJURY IN WAR AND LITERATURE

by Joshua Pederson
(A Book Review)



Perpetrator trauma is a difficult concept. Recognizing the specific pain of those who commit atrocities in war is frequently perceived as dangerous precisely because in doing so, one can lose sight of the perpetrator's accountability or fail to center the experiences of those subjected to martial violence.

Joshua Pederson's *Sin Sick: Moral Injury in War and Literature* (2021) suggests the adoption

of *moral injury*—a psychological concept that describes the affliction of those who break their moral code when committing despicable acts—as an interpretive framework to better understand texts that have been historically defined as trauma narratives by literary critics. Crucially, Pederson's book appears after twenty years of American involvement in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Given this context, it seeks to provide an innovative way through which veteran narratives of the US-led war on terrorism can be productively read without resorting to the divisive idea of perpetrator trauma, which too often seems to excuse veterans as victims of the war, thereby implicitly legitimizing imperialist discourses. However, Pederson does not aim to simply offer a solution to the shortcomings of trauma theory in this particular instance. Rather, he envisions moral injury as a way to deal with a “blind

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spot” in trauma theory, namely the study of the depiction of moral anguish resulting from perceived wrongdoing.

Pederson argues that moral injury can be characterized in terms of *excess*, a term he borrows from George Bataille’s *The Accursed Share* (1949) and *Literature and Evil* (1957). For Pederson, the various symptoms of moral injury are a manifestation of what Bataille thought of as the excess of energy received by the human body, which is expressed through these destructive symptoms. In other words, the negative characterization of one’s crime as irredeemably evil, the tendency to equate an instance of wrongdoing with a fundamentally malevolent self, the extreme isolation, and the view of the whole world as essentially immoral and populated by other immoral beings are all instances of a catastrophic use of excessive energy. Pederson argues that moral injury has powerful effects on texts, much like trauma is understood as being able to shape the works that purportedly depict it. He contends that the excessive nature of moral injury produces literary texts which contain “an overflow of speech” (55) produced by characters in an attempt to reconstruct and make sense of their experiences. Moreover, the representation of morally injured characters has consequences on literary style in three important respects: works containing examples of moral injury feature frequent use of hyperbolic language, representations of nature (or the world surrounding the characters) as sublime, and depictions of isolation (which the author calls “signs of solitude”).

To develop his account of moral injury, Pederson acknowledges Jonathan Shay’s psychological use of the term as a kind of “moral and philosophical injury” related specifically to PTSD in an article on the *Journal of Traumatic Stress* from 1991 and expands its definition according to recent studies. In his article, Shay described moral injury as a “betrayal of *nómos*” (564), or an instance in which soldiers witness or commit an act of violence that does not align with their core ethical beliefs to obey an order issued by someone holding institutionalized power. The author’s cognitivist approach draws from a remarkable number of recent studies on moral injury, chiefly those led by Brett Litz and William Nash. Following Litz et al., he integrates these two types of moral injury—witnessing the misbehavior of a superior and commissioned violence—with

two other “types” of morally injurious events: the independent perpetration of a crime and the failure to stop a misdeed.

The relative novelty of the term and the fact that clinical research plays a large part in Pederson’s argument make the first chapter the foundation upon which the author builds his argument. Pederson is obviously well-versed in both trauma theory and recent moral injury research in the field of psychology, and accordingly this chapter serves as a brief introduction to clinical research on the subject matter and breaks down the aforementioned studies while situating moral injury with respect to PTSD and feelings of guilt and shame. To do so, the author convincingly shows how moral injury is akin to guilt and shame “stuck in overdrive” and how, although the two conditions may coexist, it differs from PTSD in both symptoms and causes. As Pederson explains it, the emergence of the condition is influenced by the distance between the subject’s actions and their moral sensibility and is therefore very personal, but the study also mentions that there are particular situations that typically trigger moral injury. As a well-read scholar of “traditional” trauma theory, Pederson envisions what he deems an embryonic theory of moral injury in literature in ways that resemble the methods of early trauma theorists. However, as a critic of said trauma theory—he is distrustful of Cathy Caruth’s doctrine of unclaimed experience because it is based on outdated psychoanalytical studies—he gives greater attention to scientific developments in clinical psychology.

After establishing the theoretical and scientific foundations of his claim, Pederson turns to a diverse selection of literary texts, including Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, Camus’s *The Fall*, and a series of works by American veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to illustrate four different types of morally injured characters: the perpetrator of a crime, the witness of a misdeed (who fails to stop it), the perpetrator of a commissioned act of violence, and the witness of a crime committed by a superior. The author’s reading of Dostoevsky and Camus’s works reveals the (textual) presence of moral injury symptoms, and crucially, in the case of *The Fall*, the possible entanglement of trauma and moral injury. Pederson notes how *The Fall* has become an emblematic example of trauma literature. Shoshana Felman’s

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reading of the novel, for example, focused on silence and omission and typifies trauma theory analysis by the “first-wave” of trauma theorists. While he does not discredit such readings, he notes that Camus’s *Clamence* shows signs of moral injury; not only can the novel be read as a consideration of the consequences of failing (or being unwilling) to stop a suicide, but also as a larger meditation on a generation’s failure to stop the Second World War, thus suggesting the possible existence of *collective* moral injury.

These chapters adhere to a “genealogical” approach to moral injury that Pederson borrows from prominent trauma scholars such as Roger Luckhurst and Michael Rothberg in an attempt to show moral injury’s dynamics throughout time in different literary traditions as well as its specificity to recent historical events. To this end, the growing attention that contemporary textual manifestations of moral injury have received in the United States is explained in relation to the war on terrorism and other recent policies of the US Army.

The war on terrorism seems to be both the catalyst for as well as the most urgent object of Pederson’s discussion. The American involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan has both effectively rekindled interest in the term “moral injury” and produced an impressive number of literary works that deal with the psychological consequences of combat. However, Pederson notes that some scholars, including Sam Sacks and Adrian Lewis, have criticized the increasingly solipsistic and narrow approach of recent American war narratives produced by veterans for their focus on the viewpoint of American soldiers and their presentation of these soldiers as victims of trauma. It is here that Pederson’s book makes a significant step in the right direction, since it provides readers and critics with a much-needed alternative to the idea of perpetrator trauma. He argues that these critiques could be dismissed if only moral injury were to be taken into account, precisely because the very term entails an acknowledgement of the soldiers’ wrongdoing and asks readers to deal with the wrongness of their actions without condoning them. Crucially, Pederson points out that if this pain is understood in the context of the discussions about moral injury instead of those related to trauma, questions of responsibility are all but overlooked in these works—rather, they

are embedded in the representation of moral anguish experienced by American soldiers.

It is also here, however, that the book shows some of its weaknesses. Pederson emphasizes the fact that moral injury calls attention to the violence committed by soldiers, but the attention that is dedicated to their pain and healing—a byproduct of the origin of the term as a psychological category—means that moral injury could easily be prone to some of the same pitfalls Roy Scranton has identified with the myth of the *trauma hero*, in which the suffering of the victims of violence is silenced to reveal the pain and anguish of American soldiers. Another, related issue concerns *the way* moral injury supposedly brings about questions of moral responsibility. Instead of focusing on the responsibility of the perpetrators (and their superiors), Pederson welcomes the authors' accusations of apathy levelled against American civilians and notes how they are framed as complicit with the wrongs described in these texts. He goes as far as saying that civilian ignorance might exacerbate moral injury in veterans and that we ought to shift our attention from the responsibility of veterans as storytellers to the responsibility of civilian readers. Although this reflection could be a valuable way of initiating a discussion of current problems in the American democratic process and foreign policy, in this case it also serves as yet another way of mitigating the responsibility of those who perpetrate violence and moves us further away from the pain of those who suffer for it.

The merits of the book, however, greatly outweigh these concerns. Although at times Pederson seems to look too favorably upon veteran fiction that focuses on the US veteran's experience of war, he introduces critics and readers alike to a fresh way to understand the psychological pain of perpetrators and hopefully inaugurates a new branch of study that can complement trauma theory.

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