

Dirty Hands and Moral Injury¹

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Abstract

Moral injury describes the effects of violence on veterans beyond what trauma discourse can describe. I put moral injury in conversation with a separate but related concept, dirty hands. Focusing on Michael Walzer's framing of dirty hands and Jonathan Shay's understanding of moral injury, I argue that moral injury can be seen as part of the *dirt* of a political leader's dirty hands decisions. Such comparison can focus more attention on the broader institutional context in which such dirty hands decisions are executed, while contributing to the growing vocabulary of moral conflict, trauma, and harm.

'No judge will ever undertake to strangle with his own hands the man whom he has condemned to death.'

– Leo Tolstoy, *What I Believe*²

In the following pages I place *moral injury* into conversation with *dirty hands*. Drawn from the behavioral sciences and from political and moral philosophy respectively, both articulate the tragic nature of high stakes politics and war. They concern the ways in which violence can seem to harm one's very character and how politics itself, including political violence and war, may demand one to sacrifice their moral integrity for the greater good. These two concepts are important to several academic fields yet, because they concern tragedy, experience, and even hope, have entered into popular speech. Such a comparison, then, can help not only with academic discussions but, if we take seriously the idea that war is the continuation of politics by other means, can also help a broader audience better understand the ways politics and explicit political violence can transform moral being.³

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² *What I Believe*, (New York: Cosimo, 2009), 44.

³ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), 87.

Joseph Wiinikka-Lydon

44 There are many approaches, however, to both dirty hands and
45 moral injury. I focus on two writers who are seminal to notions of
46 dirty hands and moral injury, Michael Walzer and Jonathan Shay, re-
47 spectively.⁴ Walzer, a philosopher, and Shay, a psychiatrist, are often
48 seen as the originators of both discourses, and beyond this, they con-
49 tinue to have a significant and unique influence of their respect dis-
50 courses. Shay continues to have broad influence across multiple
51 disciplines where moral injury is engaged.⁵ And Walzer's framing
52 continues, decades later, to frame assumptions in dirty hands dis-
53 course.⁶ Indeed, Walzer's article can be seen as the 'paradigm case
54 of dirty hands.'⁷

55 Paradigm, however, is not the only reason to focus on their work.
56 Walzer and Shay frame their relevant concepts in ways that can help
57 further understanding of both terms. Moral injury, for example,
58 helps highlight overlooked aspects of dirty hands scenarios and the
59

60 ⁴ Moral injury is not a new term to philosophy. It goes back at least to
61 the debates between Jeffrie Murphy and Jean Hampton on retributive
62 justice, who were indebted to Joseph Butler [Jeffrie G. Murphy and Jean
63 Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy* (New York: Cambridge University
64 Press, 1988)]. This understanding of moral injury, however, is almost the
65 mirror opposite of how it has developed in psychology since Jonathan
66 Shay's early writing, as it focuses on the suffering of 'victims' as opposed
67 to 'perpetrators' [Joseph Wiinikka-Lydon, 'Mapping Moral Injury:
68 Comparing Discourses of Moral Harm', *Journal of Medicine and
69 Philosophy* (forthcoming).]

70 ⁵ Rita Nakashima Brock and Gabriella Lettini, *Soul Repair: Recovering
71 from Moral Injury after War* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012); Kinghorn,
72 Warren, 'Combat Trauma and Moral Fragmentation: A Theological
73 Account of Moral Injury', *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* **32**(2)
74 (2013), 57–74; Sherman, Nancy, *Afterwar: Healing the Moral Wounds of
75 Our Soldiers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Wiinikka-
76 Lydon op. cit. note 4; 'Moral Injury as Inherent Political Critique: The
77 Prophetic Possibilities of a New Term', *Political Theology* **18**(3) (2016),
219–232.

78 ⁶ Demetris Tillyris, 'Learning How Not to Be Good': Machiavelli and
79 the Standard Dirty Hands Thesis', *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* **18**
80 (2015), 61–74, 62fn1; C.A.J. Coady, 'Terrorism, Morality, and Supreme
81 Emergency', *Ethics* **114**(4) (2004), 772–89.

82 ⁷ Stephen De Wijze, 'The Real Issues Concerning Dirty Hands: A
83 Response to Kai Nielsen', *South African Journal of Philosophy* **15**(4)
84 (1996), 149–51, 2; Nielsen, 'There Is No Dilemma of Dirty Hands', in
85 Igor Primoratz (ed.), *Politics and Morality*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan,
86 2007), 20–37. De Wijze and Nielsen agree on this, even though they have
central disagreements with each other's work.

Dirty Hands and Moral Injury

87 larger ecology in which dirty hands takes place. Moral injury can also
88 be seen in dirty hands discourse as one of the results of dirty hands
89 decisions, a form of the *dirt* that certain political decisions that are
90 wrong but necessary create. The dirty hands decisions of leaders, in
91 other words, can create moral injury, a lasting feeling of moral disabili-
92 ty, in those who must carry out a leader's decisions. Conversely,
93 Walzer's understanding of dirty hands, by virtue of its focus on deci-
94 sion makers and political leaders, can call attention to the possibility of
95 a more ecological understanding of moral injury.⁸ The view of suffer-
96 ing held by many moral injury writers focuses on the individual soldier
97 or the role of the soldier, concerned as they have been with clinically
98 treating moral injury as a psychological disorder. Expanding this to
99 see moral injury not as a discreet, delimited experience but, instead,
100 a suffering that arises from the environment created through political
101 violence and shared by those within such environments, could help
102 not only in better theorizing moral injury but in therapeutic interven-
103 tions by reframing the source and nature of the suffering.

104 This essay begins by defining moral injury and dirty hands accord-
105 ing to Shay and Walzer, followed by a more in depth comparison. It
106 ends with a final constructive piece where I make an argument for
107 moral injury as part of the *dirt* of dirty hands. Central to this compari-
108 son will be trying to create a better understanding of dirty hands as a
109 tragic ecology by including the conceptual insights of moral injury
110 discourse. To do this, I analyze in both thinkers issues of leadership
111 and how the decisions of leadership affects those who carry out com-
112 mands (hierarchy); how the guilt or shame of a leader relates to that of
113 subalterns (issues of culpability); and the subjective experience and
114 emotions involved in the 'dirt' or 'injury' and the contexts in which
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116 ⁸ It should be said that several writers have argued that dirty hands be
117 deployed beyond politics since Walzer's formative essay, although I keep
118 Walzer's more narrow understanding in order to begin work on comparisons
119 with moral injury See C.A.J. Coady and Onora O'Neill, 'Messy Morality
120 and the Art of the Possible', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*,
121 *Supplementary Volumes* 64 (1990), 259–294; Stephen De Wijze op. cit.,
122 note 7, 149–51; Kai Nielsen, 'There is No Dilemma of Dirty Hands:
123 Response to Stephen de Wijze', *South African Journal of Philosophy* 15(4)
124 (1996); Michael Stocker, 'Dirty Hands and Ordinary Life', in Paul
125 Rynard and David Shugarman (eds.), *Cruelty and Deception: The*
126 *Controversy over Dirty Hands in Politics* (Peterborough, Ontario:
127 Broadview Press, 2000). Although Walzer says in his original article that
128 he does not limit dirty hands to only the political sphere, his work heavily
129 focuses on the political. See Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A*
Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations (New York: Basic Books, 2015).

130 such harms are created (environment and location). The overall goal
131 of these pages, then, is for such work to help further clarify both con-
132 cepts and, in so doing, contribute not only to discussions of dirty
133 hands but help strengthen the larger, and growing, interdisciplinary
134 vocabulary for articulating moral conflict, dilemma, and harm.

137 1. Defining Dirty Hands and Moral Injury

138
139 Walzer frames dirty hands as a ‘moral dilemma’, a situation where
140 one must choose between two options ‘both of which would be
141 wrong for him to undertake.’⁹ As the discussion of this concept has
142 progressed in philosophy, dirty hands has come to refer to those
143 times when a political leader must choose a course of action that is
144 morally wrong in order to achieve some greater good. There is as
145 C.A.J. Coady notes a good deal of necessity inherent in this under-
146 standing of dirty hands, where the politician, if she were to stick to
147 her moral principles and did not commit the wrong, would allow
148 something much worse to occur, thus necessitating wrongdoing in
149 the service of the greater good.¹⁰ Central to this, however, is action
150 taken that is knowingly evil to some degree, or at least perceived to
151 be off limits ordinarily. In other words, one chooses to put
152 their hands in the dirt, but the dire moral dimension of the
153 situation also seems to demand one’s self–inflicted impurity done
154 consciously.

155 Turning to Shay’s understanding of moral injury, he initially refers
156 to the phenomenon as the ‘undoing of character’ or the ‘ruin of good
157 character’ through ‘lifelong disabling psychiatric symptoms caused
158 by “catastrophic war experiences.”’¹¹ Although in this early defin-
159 ition moral injury is said to ‘ruin’ character itself, I would also
160 allow within the definition of moral injury the individual’s *subjective*
161 *sense* that they are no long ‘good’ persons, can no longer pursue the
162 good, or that the world is bereft of goodness or its possibility, even
163 if objective observers or those close to the morally injured person
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166 ⁹ Michael Walzer, ‘Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands’,
167 *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 2(2) (1973), 160–80, 160.

168 ¹⁰ Coady op. cit. note 6, 779.

169 ¹¹ Jonathan Shay, ‘Learning About Combat Stress from Homer’s
170 Iliad’, *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 4(4) (1991), 561–79, 563; Jonathan
171 Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*
172 (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), xiii.

Dirty Hands and Moral Injury

would say the person still has a good character.¹² What is crucial for the definition, however, is that the individual experiences such a moral fall. They feel that they are no longer able to successfully strive toward certain expectations of what it is to be a good person.¹³ In other words, having carried out the duties of the soldier, they feel they are no longer capable – emotionally, cognitively – of fulfilling the roles of parent, family member, community member, or citizen, among others.¹⁴

Walzer’s emphasis on leadership also matches well with that of Shay, who in his original formulation of moral injury defines it in terms of leadership and the chain of command. Shay argues that moral injury arises when a soldier’s ‘moral order’ is shaken after perceiving that their commander has betrayed what is right. He argues specifically that moral injury occurs when ‘(1) there has been a betrayal of what’s right [according to the soldier] (2) by someone who holds legitimate authority (3) in a high-stakes situation.’¹⁵ Moral injury for Shay, then, is something that soldiers in battle feel, but it is also about military, and possibly political, leadership. This framing stresses not only the suffering of the individual soldier but also the source of that suffering, arising as it does from the relation between superiors and subordinates in the political conflict known as war.

In general and broad terms, then, dirty hands can be defined as doing wrong in order to effect an important good (or at least, forestall a greater evil), while a moral injury is harm incurred to one’s sense of goodness and one’s sense of their own ability to strive toward being a good person in the very attempt to do good or carry out an important duty.¹⁶ Both terms are concerned about the moral status of certain

¹² Other theorists also acknowledge this distinction (Sherman op. cit. note 5, 77–104).

¹³ I take this notion of *striving* as central to moral life from Julia Annas’s articulation of virtue ethics (Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 18, 52).

¹⁴ Shay, op. cit. note 11, xx.

¹⁵ Jonathan Shay, ‘Casualties’, *Daedalus* 140(3) (2011), 179–88, 183.

¹⁶ There are, generally speaking, two main definitions of moral injury within psychology today. There is Shay’s, which focuses on betrayal and the relationship of subaltern to superior. The other focuses more on feelings of self-betrayal and a soldier’s violation of their own closely held beliefs (Litz, Bret T. et al., ‘Moral Injury and Moral Repair in War Veterans: A Preliminary Model and Intervention Strategy’, *Clinical Psychology Review* 29 (2009), 695–706). Shay does eventually agree to the idea of self-betrayal

216 actions in the political sphere that create dubious effects not only on
217 the world and others but also one's self.

2. Comparison

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222 Walzer and Shay's approach to their respective concepts differ in
223 some important ways, however, including what the content of the
224 *injury* and the *dirt* actually are, as well as the role of emotions;
225 whether or not one is aware ahead of time that their actions are
226 wrong; and how that affects the potential of repair. I take each of
227 these in turn to gain a better sense of how these two specific,
228 seminal formulations of moral injury and dirty hands relate, before
229 moving on to the more constructive part of this essay.

2.1. Choice and Awareness of Wrongdoing

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234 Walzer's politician decides and acts with the knowledge that what she
235 has decided is wrong, even as it is necessary to achieve either a greater
236 good or minimize a greater evil. The politician, then, has evaluative
237 awareness of her action yet chooses it all the same. If she did not, re-
238 sponsibility would give way to more total tragedy, as not unlike
239 Oedipus, the politician would choose without understanding the con-
240 sequences of those choices. The politician would never know that a
241 moral principle or moral principles had been broken, thus endanger-
242 ing cherished values through ignorance.

243 Of course, the politician may realize after the fact that what she had
244 decided was wrong, or at least, caused more harm than good, but this
245 would no longer be a case of dirty hands. It would be closer to moral
246 injury. The morally injured subject, unlike the politician who has
247 dirtied her hands, does not know that they will view their actions
248 after the fact as wrong and harmful. There is a shock, even a break,
249 to moral injury where the way one had understood the moral
250 ecology of the world prior to their injurious experience is found retro-
251 spectively to be incorrect. This can create a moral cognitive disson-
252 ance raising doubt concerning one's continuing ability to strive to
253 be good or whether goodness can occur in the world at all.

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257 as well (Jonathan Shay, 'Moral Injury', *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 31(2)
258 (2014), 182–91, 182).

Dirty Hands and Moral Injury

259 An example concerning what could be called moral injury comes
260 from Roger Benimoff, an U.S. army chaplain who served in the
261 U.S.–Iraq war and occupation. Benimoff writes of his time in the oc-
262 cupation and details his struggles trying to care for hundreds of sol-
263 diers. It is a spiritual reflection as much as a wartime memoir.
264 Benimoff was highly decorated for his work, diagnosed with
265 ‘chronic post–traumatic stress disorder’, spent time in the hospital
266 for mental health needs, and wrestled with issues of theodicy and
267 his faith.¹⁷ He describes himself at certain moments in his book,
268 *Faith under Fire*, as a ‘failed’ person, ‘spiritually void’, and writes
269 in the first person that ‘I was angry at everyone, especially those I
270 once held dear to me, God included. I didn’t want anything to do
271 with anyone, especially myself.’¹⁸ Although Benimoff does not say
272 he was diagnosed as having clinical moral injury, his discussion of
273 himself as a failed person, afraid of his kids and the noises he made,
274 unable to help his wife in raising the children, no longer being able
275 to be the person he once was, and feeling betrayed by god, can
276 make one feel, characterologically, failed or damaged, which is
277 typical of moral injury. In addition, he entered into the military
278 unaware of such risks inherent in combat. He writes of his experience
279 in the military,

280 When I first enlisted as a soldier, in 1991, I wanted to go to war; I
281 saw it as the greatest form of service to one’s country. It took two
282 deployments for me to recognize that violence simply leads to
283 more violence, that we are poorly equipped as humans to judge
284 who should deserve to die. I hate war. I’ve seen the spilled
285 blood and the aftermath that soldiers and their families must
286 face for the rest of their lives. It was my job as a chaplain to
287 wade through that aftermath, to try to help them wash away a
288 helplessness that threatened to permanently stain any normal
289 person’s consciousness.¹⁹

291 This retrospective regret, and even remorse, was just that: an unfore-
292 seen violation of one’s ‘basic moral identity.’²⁰ His work in the army
293 did not seem negative before or during the action, but only retro-
294 spectively, once he reflected on his participation, the occupation,
295 and on war itself.

297 ¹⁷ Roger Benimoff and Eve Conant, *Faith Under Fire: An Army*
298 *Chaplain’s Memoir* (New York: Crown Publishing, 2009), 161.

299 ¹⁸ Benimoff and Conant, op. cit. note 17, 178.

300 ¹⁹ Benimoff and Conant, op. cit. note 17, 233.

301 ²⁰ Brock and Lettini op. cit. note 5, xiv.

302 Dirty hands, then, is characterized not only by necessity but also
303 awareness of this situation and action taken in this knowledge.
304 Moral injury, on the other hand, may be seen to arise either from a
305 similar situation where no good courses of action exist or from situa-
306 tions where there are, perhaps, quite good courses of action. Both
307 dirty hands and moral injury may result in guilt, remorse, even some-
308 thing on the line of De Wijze's *tragic remorse*, yet the morally injured
309 are so injured because they only come to regard what they have done
310 as wrong or as a form of violation after the fact.²¹ In other words,
311 moral injury is something closer to Williams's *agent regret* in that
312 the morally injured may come to feel it would have been much
313 better not to have acted in the way they did, and even though an ob-
314 jective observer may argue the soldier is not responsible, the soldier is
315 still related to the action in a unique way.²²

316 To state this another way, there is a strong epistemological distinc-
317 tion between the two concepts. Dirty hands is more Machiavellian
318 than, say, Oedipal in that the leader has a significant understanding
319 of the situation and the moral dimensions of the choices available
320 to them that empowers the choice to dirty their hands for the
321 greater good (the greater good, at least, in Walzer's understanding).
322 If dirty hands is tragic, it is so because of the inherent moral limita-
323 tions of politics itself, not necessarily because of the moral deficien-
324 cies of the individual actor. Indeed, such remorse is tragic because
325 of a responsible and accurate moral deliberation.²³ Moral injury,
326 however, at least for Shay, arises when the soldier trusts that the
327 officer or leader will not be careless with the soldier's life, which
328 means the soldier *trusts* the officer's judgment, at least to some
329 extent. There is then vulnerability inherent in this relationship and
330 in the soldier's epistemological status, a vulnerability that is the
331 ground of one's moral injury. As I will illustrate later, it is this epis-
332 temological imbalance between the officer/leader and the soldier,
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335 ²¹ De Wijze defines *tragic remorse* because he argues other, related
336 terms, such as regret, remorse, or agent-regret, do not capture the specific
337 emotional dimension of dirty hands. It is a specific form of remorse that
338 comes from a responsible agent who takes action that, though shameful, is
339 still necessary. Further fruitful comparison of this concept and moral
340 injury is needed (Stephen De Wijze, 'Tragic Remorse: The Anguish of
341 Dirty Hands', *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 7 (2004), 453–71).

342 ²² Bernard Williams, 'Moral Luck', in *Moral Luck: Philosophical*
343 *Papers, 1973–1980*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981),
344 20–39, 30.

²³ De Wijze op. cit. note 21.

Dirty Hands and Moral Injury

345 and the epistemological dimension of dirty hands and moral injury,
346 that can connect them as concepts.

347 348 349 2.2. *The Injury of Moral Injury* 350

351 This, of course, does not mean that soldiers in wartime cannot experi-
352 ence dirty hands in the more traditional sense of consciously choosing
353 the lesser of two evils. Indeed, there are sadly too many opportunities
354 during war for soldiers to knowingly commit wrongdoing out of ne-
355 cessity and duty, whether it is to save the life of a fellow soldier,
356 protect an important area, or as part of the larger goal of victory,
357 which can have its own goods. In such cases, soldiers can still feel
358 they committed a wrong even while doing good.

359 For the morally injured, their experience can leave a lasting fracture
360 in the morally injured soldier's moral worldview in one or more of
361 three ways. They may no longer be certain that they or the world is
362 capable of 'goodness' or, perhaps, they may feel that the world had
363 never been a place of goodness and that they had deceived themselves
364 or been lied to all this time. One can of course see moral injury as a
365 sacrifice made to help others or the greater good, a sacrifice necessi-
366 tated by wartime, but it seems that the injured do not readily see it
367 that way.²⁴ Consolation, if it comes, will more likely arise from an ac-
368 ceptance of their lack of agency, a lack of responsibility, for what they
369 did in wartime.²⁵ To quote Walzer's later work, itself a quote, 'war is
370 hell', and so, soldiers cannot be expected to take on responsibility for
371 the ravages of war, if they behaved in certain parameters, at least.²⁶

372 Indeed, what exactly is injured in moral injury, as far as one's
373 physiology and material psychological substrates, is still a matter of
374 debate.²⁷ What the injury feels like, however, is easier to grasp.
375 Moral injury has been described in terms of both *guilt* and *shame*,
376 and so is similar in that respect to dirty hands. It is seen as a persistent
377 suffering, which terms such as *trauma*, that do not usually include the
378 more moral aspects of one's being, do not seem adequate to embody.
379 Moral injury can feel like 'worthlessness, remorse, despair' where the
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382 ²⁴ Indeed, this may be an important difference ~~in those~~ morally injured
383 and those who do not seem to be so profoundly affected.

384 ²⁵ Sherman op. cit. note 5.

385 ²⁶ Walzer op. cit. note 8, 22.

386 ²⁷ It is difficult to discuss largely due to the dearth of moral language in
387 psychology (Litz et al. op. cit. note 16, 696).

388 injured feel they are only a shade of their former self.²⁸ Such feelings
389 can result in decreased functionality in one's daily life, a difficulty
390 with relationships, etc. In this sense, what is injured is one's ability
391 to function in society in fulfillment of certain norms. Whatever
392 aspect of a person's physiology or neurochemistry is harmed, the
393 injury can be described at least in part as these feelings, which
394 make it harder to be happy, have sustainable relationships, and to
395 live meaningfully.

396
397
398 *2.3. The Dirt of Dirty Hands*
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400 The feelings of shame and guilt that occur in moral injury are also
401 similar to the experience of dirty hands. There is, however, a distinc-
402 tion made in dirty hands discourse between feeling guilty, that is the
403 first-person sense of one's own culpability, and acknowledging culp-
404 ability from another standpoint, such as law, universal reason, a
405 generic third-party standpoint, etc.²⁹ Although most dirty hands theo-
406 rists seem to agree that either guilt or regret would result for the in-
407 dividual dirtying their hands, for some such as Nielson, however, that
408 is not the import of the concept. Such philosophers are more con-
409 cerned with the ethical status of those choices, although they do
410 not doubt that one may feel bad about their dirty choices. Not the ex-
411 perience but whether such choices are truly wrong, and whether they
412 really represent dilemmas, are the central issues of the discourse.³⁰
413 Dirty hands, then, is not universally concerned with questions of
414 wellbeing as they are with moral injury discourse.

415 For Walzer, however, the phenomenological aspects remain central.³¹
416 One is dirtied, made somehow impure, and this would seem to affect
417 one's wellbeing. For example, in his seminal 1973 article, 'Political
418 Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands', Walzer uses a number of hypo-
419 theoretical cases, each with a different agent in a different governmental
420 role, to illustrate his understanding of dirty hands. One of these cases
421 centers on a local politician who is also a good man, the kind of
422 person whose integrity would make them a valued public official. In
423 order to realize his potential, however, the individual needs to get
424 elected, yet if our good man has any chance of winning the election,

426 ²⁸ Brock and Lettini op. cit. note 5, xv.

427 ²⁹ Stephen De Wijze op. cit. note 21, 458; Kai Nielsen op. cit. note 7, 21.

428 ³⁰ Kai Nielsen op. cit. note 29.

429 ³¹ Leslie Griffin, 'The Problem of Dirty Hands', *Journal of Religious*
430 *Ethics* 17(1) (1989), 31–61, 32–34.

Dirty Hands and Moral Injury

431 he must grease the hands of an unsavory ward boss.³² Walzer empha-
432 sizes in this example the politician's emotions as particularly salient to
433 understanding what is the 'dirt' in dirty hands. The guilt the politician
434 feels for making the deal with the ward boss is their own acknowledgement
435 that they know they have committed an immoral act, and so, ex-
436 perience the appropriate corollary emotion. In an Aristotelian
437 formulation, they are feeling the right emotion at the right time and
438 for the right reason. And, this 'rightness' reveals a virtuous or excellent
439 character.

440 Emotion, then, is central for Walzer's understanding of dirty
441 hands. It is, to a significant extent, the feeling of becoming dirty,
442 yet also of believing one is actually dirty and has committed a
443 wrong.³³ As a result, dirty hands does not have much intelligibility
444 for Walzer without the politician's interior, emotional life. This is
445 true, even though I would argue Walzer would want to reserve the
446 right to evaluate a situation as one that a politician *should* feel dirty
447 over, whether or not they actually do.

448 Further, this subjective dimension of dirty hands is important to
449 Walzer because it assures others that, although the politician has
450 committed an immoral act purportedly to achieve a greater good,
451 the politician truly understands the moral stakes involved. She
452 knows the gravity of what she has done and understands the necessity
453 of having done so. And when displaying this remorse publicly, she
454 communicates to the population that a wrong has been committed
455 and that the politician knows it. In other words, the politician is
456 moral, is responsible, and responds to committing immoral acts,
457 even for a good cause, in a way that a good person should. That
458 is, they take responsibility for their actions. The guilt, in other
459 words, is evidence of dirty hands and also evidence of a good charac-
460 ter, for only someone with good character will respond to dirty hands
461 appropriately with guilt.

462 463 464 2.4. *Injury versus Dirt* 465

466 The two concepts have many qualities that facilitate a fruitful com-
467 parison. They deal with decisions and often dilemmas, participation
468 in morally challenging situations, vulnerability concerning moral
469 selfhood, as well as the emotional remainder of engaging in high
470 stakes, often violent situations. To some extent it could seem that
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472 ³² Walzer op. cit. note 9, 166.

473 ³³ Walzer op. cit. note 9, 174.

Joseph Wiinikka-Lydon

474 they cover the same conceptual territory. Moral injury could simply
475 be the experience of having dirty hands, and dirty hands could simply
476 be the way one is morally injured. If applied liberally enough, both
477 terms could overlap considerably. One of the reasons I compare
478 Walzer and Shay, however, is that they help demonstrate the profit
479 in maintaining the separate integrity and comprehensibility of these
480 two concepts.

481 There is as I have argued an epistemological difference between
482 these concepts, but there is also a phenomenological difference, as
483 well. Although the same emotions are used to describe shame,
484 guilt, and remorse, such universalizing terms can collapse the agentive
485 and moral distinctions to be had between different institutional
486 roles. This insistence is important, because Walzer does not spend
487 time considering the greater ecology of dirty hands and how such decisions
488 will affect those who carry out ‘dirty’ commands. Shay does,
489 though he is not therapeutically concerned with the wellbeing of
490 commanders. In Shay’s writing, it is the chain of command that is
491 the culprit.³⁴ What this means, then, is that, although both the
492 dirtied and the injured may feel remorse or guilt, their relationship
493 to the same choices and actions will be different, as will the nature
494 of their responsibility for those actions. The impurity that a politician
495 or decision maker might feel may be more abstract or more intimate,
496 but it will not be, except for rare occurrences, as intimate as the experience
497 of the soldier who, as Brock and Lettini demonstrated, is
498 bodily involved in the act of violence (or, at the very least, is physically
499 active in theaters or environments of violence). One – perhaps a
500 civilian – may feel implicated in war as a part of the political community,
501 but it is the soldier’s hand that steadies and fires the gun.³⁵ This
502 means that, regardless of how a third party would evaluate the responsibility
503 of all those involved, responsibility must also be seen phenomenologically
504 in moral injury discourse as something that is felt
505 bodily by those involved. There are, then, feelings of morality – the
506 phenomenology of morality – that will differ between the two concepts
507 depending on each individual’s worldview, moral disposition,
508 understanding of their role, etc.

509 There is also a distinction in how experience affects one over the
510 long term. In each case, one approaches an action – even the same
511 action – with different expectations concerning its moral status and
512 how such an action may affect them psychologically. The soldier in
513 the dirty hands scenario may still feel guilt-ridden and even have
514

515 ³⁴ Shay *op. cit.* note 16.

516 ³⁵ Brock and Lettini *op. cit.* note 5.

Dirty Hands and Moral Injury

517 what De Wijze calls *tragic remorse*, but there is also the potential con-
518 solation that what they did they had to in that it allowed for greater
519 goods, for saved lives. The morally injured soldier, however, may
520 be deprived of such a consolation, as both the action and the
521 outcome are perceived as net negatives. Benimoff's case, exemplified
522 previously, illustrates how a soldier can feel at least for a time that
523 their work is ultimately ambivalent or even unjust, pulling a caul
524 over any related good works accomplished. Moral injury, then,
525 stands to upend one's assumptions about the nature of the world
526 for the morally injured person, while dirty hands, though tragic, to
527 some degree confirms the subject's sense about politics and that the
528 world as it is might demand wrongdoing from 'good' persons.³⁶

529 This brings forward another distinction between dirty hands and
530 moral injury, that is, what exactly is harmed. For Walzer, there is
531 an impurity that comes from dirty hands. One is 'dirtied' as they
532 have had to sacrifice a moral principle or decide to forsake striving
533 for an image of what it is to be good (e.g., a good person, a good poli-
534 tician, etc.). Moral injury, at least for Shay, is defined by betrayal. A
535 soldier's trust in their leaders is broken by the decisions of those
536 leaders, resulting in a feeling of moral harm. It is possible, of
537 course, that one could feel betrayed in dirtying one's hands. There
538 could be a feeling that one's parents raised one with ideals that could
539 not ultimately withstand the world's harsh realism. They could even
540 feel that society or the universe or even God had somehow betrayed
541 one's trust in a world good enough to maintain the possibility of
542 virtue in politics. Walzer's driving concern, however, concerns the re-
543 lationship of politics to morality and to counter the Machiavellian un-
544 derstanding of this relationship and the Levinasian provocation that
545 'politics is opposed to morality.'³⁷ For this reason, Walzer focuses on
546 the moral taint that politics can leave on the politician by forcing
547 immoral choices on him or her, and later in his seminal work how
548 one can be morally repaired.³⁸ Shay, on the other hand, is concerned
549 not with liberal political philosophy but with therapy, specifically,
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551 ³⁶ This is not meant to be an absolute distinction. I can imagine a poli-
552 tician that, even though they do wrongdoing with eyes wide open to create a
553 higher good, may still come through feeling that their character or the world
554 has somehow been lessened. Indeed, it is possible to go into a situation
555 knowing that it will dirty one's hands without fully appreciating beforehand
556 the effect such 'dirt' will have after.

557 ³⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*,
558 tr. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Penn.: Duquesne University Press,
559 1969), 21.

³⁸ Walzer, op. cit. note 9, 166.

560 with a form of suffering in soldiers sustained through their role as sol-
561 diers. Moral injury, in Shay's conception, is the result of the moral
562 taint that can come from participation in war, but specifically by deci-
563 sions that are put upon soldiers.

566 3. Moral Injury as a Consequence of Dirty Hands

567
568 If we look, then, at political decisions – dirty hands decisions – that
569 have a bearing on political violence or war, then, we might also be
570 able to view moral injury, at least in certain scenarios, as resulting
571 from a leader's dirty hands scenario. This allows for a number of in-
572 sights regarding dirty hands, particularly Walzer's formulation. For
573 example, a comparison to moral injury helps highlight the fact that
574 Walzer does not extend his understanding of dirty hands beyond
575 the individual as political leader who seems solely responsible for
576 certain decisions.³⁹ He admits that dirty hands may exist in other con-
577 texts but argues for the uniqueness of *political* dirty hands in that
578 the politician alone both wields violence, which suggests harm to
579 others, and takes responsibility for the broader society on behalf of
580 which he or she makes the hard choices.⁴⁰ Walzer acknowledges
581 that a politician works within institutions, yet his development of
582 dirty hands does not explore what the material location and social re-
583 lationships involved in politics mean for dirty hands, its scope, and its
584 influence. He does not explore the relationships, norms, and roles of
585 such institutions and how dirty hands relates to this complex context.

586 As a result, Walzer does not acknowledge that others are involved
587 not only in decision making but also in executing the politician's de-
588 cision. This makes Walzer's account too individualistic, as S.L.
589 Sutherland argues, focusing on the lone political actor, which is a sur-
590 prising move for a thinker who has in other works exhibited a strong
591 historical and institutional acuity.⁴¹ When one looks at the many
592 levels, departments, and institutions required to execute an executive

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594 ³⁹ There are, for example, arguments that the *dirt* should be shared
595 more broadly by the public they represent. See David Archard, 'Dirty
596 Hands and the Complicity of the Democratic Public', *Ethical Theory and*
597 *Moral Practice* 16 (2013), 777–90; Martin Hollis, 'Dirty Hands', *British*
598 *Journal of Political Science* 12(4) (1982), 385–98.

599 ⁴⁰ Walzer op. cit. note 9, 161, 169, 174.

600 ⁴¹ S.L. Sutherland, 'Retrospection and Democracy: Brining Political
601 Conduct under the Constitution' in David Shugarman and Paul Rynard
602 (eds.), *Cruelty and Deception: The Controversy over Dirty Hands in*
Politics, (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2000), 207–27.

Dirty Hands and Moral Injury

603 order in the United States, it seems an odd choice to focus exclusively
604 on the feelings of an executive over the emotional experience of sol-
605 diers who actually have to carry out such orders and thereby manufac-
606 ture the dirt of dirty hands. Indeed, why is the guilt of the politician
607 who orders violence (assuming for the moment that such an order
608 dirties their hands) any more dramatic, morally significant, or intel-
609 lectually interesting than that of the soldier who must participate in
610 that violence and, sometimes at close range, see the dirt created in
611 real time? Is it not true that it is the soldier who, by having to carry
612 out the order, is more dirtied? Why, then, this privileging of the po-
613 litician's suffering instead of the soldier's in dirty hands discourse?

614 Walzer's focus on the individual choice of the individual leader, al-
615 though perhaps helping to evaluate issues surrounding one particular
616 role in political institutions, determines in its very framing what
617 counts as *dirt*. This limits a fuller, more accurate accounting of the
618 dirt that high stakes dirty hands decisions create. This approach
619 also ends up eliding the larger institutional ecology in which dirty
620 hands decisions are made and executed. As the quote from Leo
621 Tolstoy's *What I Believe*, referenced at the beginning of this essay,
622 argues, the judge or leader is rarely also the executioner or soldier,
623 at least not in the modern societies Walzer is referencing. There are
624 always those who must execute the will or policy of leadership. In
625 the case of war, or even torture, there is a hierarchy not only of sol-
626 diers or torturers but also of officers, generals, lawyers, policy
627 makers, staff, and others who inform the decision, argue for and
628 against it, give it shape, pick persons to carry it out, and then those
629 who do carry it out, not to mention those who must clean up the
630 mess afterward.⁴² At any node in this ecology, one could feel guilt
631 for their participation or even for failing to sway decision makers in
632 a different direction. When Walzer privileges the lone political
633 leader as the location of dirty hands, he obscures the larger institu-
634 tional ecology in which decision makers are informed, in which
635 they make decision, and in which those decisions are made reality.
636 By obscuring this ecology, we are not able to fully understand the
637 way in which the 'dirt' in dirty hands is shared by many persons
638 and in many ways. And since it is the politician who knowingly
639 takes on the weight of what must be done, this ends up valorizing
640 the leader. That the politician must atone afterward gives Walzer's

642 ⁴² Demetris Tillyris op. cit. note 6, 65–55; Henry Shue, 'Torture in
643 Dreamland: Disposing of the Ticking Bomb', *Case Western Reserve*
644 *Journal of International Law* 37(2) (2006), 231–39; Stephen De Wijze,
645 'Torture and Liberalism', *Democratija* 7 (2006), 1–22.

Joseph Wiinikka-Lydon

646 logic a theological structure (a form of political soteriology).⁴³ Such
647 emphasis spotlights the leader in a way that can cast a shadow on
648 her subordinates' experience.

649 Moral injury is important here, as it helps to clarify, at least in part,
650 what this broader ecology is, and by making it part of dirty hands dis-
651 course, can aid in correcting any overly individualistic accounts. For
652 example, moral injury signals that one can feel morally impure not
653 only through the kind of consent that Walzer has in mind but also
654 by feeling betrayed by the fact that one's actions, done in good
655 faith, can turn out to be morally ambiguous, at best, and at worse,
656 morally culpable. Such injury arises readily from the complex
657 moral landscape of war, where one's sense of right and wrong can
658 change under the violence and extreme environment that can give
659 rise to extreme dilemmas. There, soldiers can execute actions they
660 thought would be just only to feel afterward that such participation
661 violated some core principle, value, or virtue of their character and
662 moral self-regard.

663 There is also the further consequence that, when seeing moral
664 injury as a result – part of the *dirt* – of dirty hands, the decisions of
665 politicians become fraught, not less so. The consequences of a
666 leader's decision will affect the felt character of many subordinates.
667 Not everyone will feel morally injured as a result, but some will,
668 and this fact creates a double culpability in the politician's dirty
669 hands. If political leaders continue to be privileged in such a dis-
670 course – and not all theorists follow Walzer on this – then the
671 leader's guilt must be understood not only to involve the immoral
672 act but also the way that such a decision will affect some of his or
673 her own people. This is particularly true for those in the institutions
674 – the overall ecology – of dirty hands who must participate in that de-
675 cision to different degrees of acquiescence and knowledge about the
676 moral status of a leader's order.

677 I do not want to push this point too far, however, because Walzer
678 obviously knows this.⁴⁴ The point is that the way Walzer formulates
679 dirty hands elides the experiences of the many who contribute to and
680 are affected by decisions that are made to seem contained on the level
681

682 ⁴³ See Griffin op. cit. note 31, 32–34, for an overview of the religious
683 connections to Walzer's stance.

684 ⁴⁴ I say 'obviously', because Walzer published his seminal article on
685 dirty hands near the conclusion of the war between the US and North
686 Vietnam, a war whose media coverage in the United States, and to a signifi-
687 cant extent, its cultural debate, focused on the experience of common
688 soldiers.

Dirty Hands and Moral Injury

689 of individual leadership. Part of this is because Walzer is concerned,
690 ultimately, with trying to salvage morality from political necessity, to
691 save morality from Machiavelli's insistence. In doing so, however, his
692 influential formulation of dirty hands discourse obscures an entire di-
693 mension of responsibility and culpability in political decision
694 making. When a politician takes on the responsibility for dirty
695 hands, a decision that Walzer sees as freely taken, the politician also
696 makes that decision for those down the hierarchy who must create a
697 plan to execute their orders, those who must command others to
698 execute those orders, and those who actually must execute those
699 orders. Not everyone will feel guilty, of course, but guilt is not some-
700 thing only for those who have consciously take responsibility for war
701 or torture or extreme political situations upon themselves. Moral
702 harms, moral injuries, will be felt, regardless, and in a much wider
703 context of causation than Walzer foresees. In other words, and to
704 follow Tolstoy, the judge cannot act alone. To be a judge (or politi-
705 cian) is to order others to participate in their judgment (or policies),
706 including those who may not have been privy to the judge's reasoning
707 and internal turmoil. It is also to change the world through your
708 rulings and policies, and such change occurs not only in the material
709 structure of the world, but in the minds of those who, by caring out
710 'dirty' orders, may themselves be made impure. A subordinate may
711 take consolation, as Nancy Sherman argues, from their lessened re-
712 sponsibility as a result, but as Walzer himself argues, even one who
713 feels what has happened is right may still, in cases such as killing,
714 still feel guilty and still feel implicated.⁴⁵

715 To an extent, Walzer knows this, too. In his discussion of firing
716 squads, he talks about the ways that both the executioner who believes
717 in the rightness of his work and the executioner who is against the
718 death penalty may both feel guilt, the first out of a general human re-
719 luctance to kill another human and the later for violating a cherished
720 value. The seed of my gesturing toward a larger ecology, then, is in
721 Walzer's formulation, but his emphasis on the choices of the privi-
722 leged role of political leadership prevents him from exploring it
723 further. Moral injury can be helpful, as comparison with it can
724 place needed emphasis in dirty hands discourse on this aspect of
725 the ecology in which dirty hands decisions are made and executed.
726 Shay, in particular, with his understanding of moral injury as a be-
727 trayal on the part of the military brass helps correct this elision in
728 Walzer's initial definition by focusing on the way that leadership,
729 particularly in a hierarchy and when high stakes are involved, can
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731 ⁴⁵ Sherman op. cit. note 5; Walzer, op. cit. note 9, 173.

732 have deeply lasting consequences for subalterns. What Shay's defini-
733 tion illustrates, then, is the way in which political decisions can harm
734 not only a politician's self regard but also those who did not have the
735 privilege of deciding whether or not they would participate in a par-
736 ticular political decision. This can be felt as betrayal down the line.⁴⁶

737 Differentiating between these experiences is important because
738 there is a large power differential between the political leader and the
739 soldier. There is also a significant difference in their relationship and
740 proximity to the violence or dirt that is ordered. A politician ordering
741 a massacre or torture will not witness the actual violence unless they
742 choose to do so. More likely, the guilt a politician will feel will arise
743 more abstractly from their imagining what has happened but not neces-
744 sarily from direct experience. The soldier, on the other hand, is
745 the one who must make actually plunge their hands into the muck
746 they have created. On a battlefield, that dirt is visceral and not abstract.
747 Although the leader may feel remorseful, it is no surprise that soldiers,
748 and not politicians, suffer from trauma, and that the military hospitals
749 are filled not with regretful politicians but with the subalterns who
750 carry out the orders. In this sense, Shay's intentional naming of this
751 experience as an 'injury' is helpful, as it underscores the direct experi-
752 ence one has as someone who executes an order.

753 One final note about the relationship of dirty hands and moral
754 injury. Walzer speaks of discrete decisions about easily delineated
755 issues, such as whether to grease the hand of a contractor or
756 whether or not to torture an individual. I view issues of choice
757 more broadly. Dirty hands need not be limited to an identifiable, dis-
758 creet moment of choice by a leader, just as moral injury need not be
759 caused by a specific incident. Helping bring a war into being and
760 keeping it going can create plenty of dirt, and just by participating
761 in such wars, one can become morally injured. Moral injury has
762 been diagnosed not only in persons who have actively harmed
763 someone but also from those who handle human remains, who have
764 simply witnessed death's passage or its aftermath, or even those
765 removed from direct killing.⁴⁷ Indeed, what counts as a morally in-
766 jurious transgression can range widely.⁴⁸ The case of Benimoff is
767

768 ⁴⁶ De Wijze also sees dirty hands through the lens of betrayal one makes
769 against 'persons, values, and principles', something that could connect this
770 with his work (Stephen De Wijze op. cit. note 7).

771 ⁴⁷ Litz et al. op. cit. note 16, 696.

772 ⁴⁸ Sheila Frankfurt and Patricia Frazier, 'A Review of Research on
773 Moral Injury in Combat Veterans', *Military Psychology* 28(5) (2016):
774 318–330.

Dirty Hands and Moral Injury

775 again illustrative as his pain came not from killing but from the ex-
776 perience of participation more generally, of being a caregiver in
777 extreme, violent circumstances. Moral injury, then, underscores the
778 fact that one need not commit a discreet act of violence to feel the
779 harm to one's character and sense of self that extreme conflicts,
780 such as war, can create. The greater ecology of war or political vio-
781 lence, and not only (and perhaps not mainly) discrete acts of will or
782 acquiescence, create lasting moral harm. This also includes dirty
783 hands, which can come about not only from discreet choices but
784 also through general policy making. That participation in politics
785 itself can be dirtying, and not just specific choices, is of course a
786 broader discussion that will have to wait for a later time.

787 Such ecology, however, is often overlooked in the emphasis on clinical
788 treatment in moral injury discourse. This is surely understandable,
789 as clinicians and behavioral scientists have had to engage first and fore-
790 most with the individual and his or her chronic sufferings. Moral
791 injury was created to help give a name to suffering that specific vocabu-
792 lary, such as *post-traumatic stress disorder*, did not seem to reflect. At
793 the same time, such a discourse will only be as helpful in treatment
794 as far as it reflects the reality from which moral injury springs. What
795 a comparison with dirty hands begins to do for moral injury discourse
796 is to show the true ecology of vulnerability and suffering that extends
797 not just through to the soldier on the ground but includes those not
798 even within the theater of war. There is a complex ecology to war
799 and extended periods of political violence that create not just subjectiv-
800 ities but intersubjectivities where the suffering of one is related to and
801 possibly generative of another's. Moral subjectivity is inherently moral
802 intersubjectivity and treatments that deal with something so profound
803 as a *moral* injury require a broader conception of suffering and its
804 nature than what is often available.⁴⁹

807 4. Conclusion

809 Seeing moral injury as the dirt that dirty hands decisions creates can
810 help expand dirty hands discourse to connect with other discourses,
811 as well as revisit some assumptions within dirty hands discussions,
812 themselves. Seeing dirty hands as part of moral injury, at least
813 Shay's approach to moral injury, can help highlight the suffering
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815 ⁴⁹ Jacob K. Farnsworth et al., 'A Functional Approach to
816 Understanding and Treating Military-Related Moral Injury', *Journal of*
817 *Contextual Behavioral Science* 6 (2017), 391-7.

Joseph Wiinikka-Lydon

818 that occurs not only for the soldier but also for those forced by neces-
819 sity to order actions that violate their own cherished moral principles.
820 And the choice of war for this essay is apt, as war puts under pressure
821 our moral assumptions and brings out the complexity and indeed
822 tragedy of politics to an unparalleled degree. If there is any human
823 occupation that creates dirt, war and the killing and maiming of
824 others must certainly be quintessential, although certainly not ex-
825 haustive. This hopefully will be a step toward expanding concepts
826 and vocabulary, and so the broader analytical language, used to
827 better understand the contours and consequences of some of society's
828 most tragic choices.

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