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How do people experience extreme violence and trauma, and what are the effects? How can character and virtues help people avoid related moral injury, or at least work through it with resilience to a new place of post-traumatic wholeness? Religious and social ethicist Joseph Wiinikka-Lydon explores these and related questions in *Moral Injury and the Promise of Virtue*, based on his doctoral dissertation at Emory University. There is an extensive and growing literature on moral injury but Wiinikka-Lydon offers several original perspectives to inform the conversation.

Firstly, he focuses on the moral injury of victims of political violence. Much of the literature focuses on the injury of the offender or agent, or when the receptor of moral injury is treated it is often the obeying soldier or bystander-ally. Wiinikka-Lydon turns particularly to the lived experience of besieged Sarajevans during the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina (1992–95). He describes how victims and survivors experienced the intense conflict, siege, starvation, moral dilemmas, rape, torture, concentration camps and genocide. For example, Zlatko Dizdarević in *Sarajevo: A War Journal* ((New York: Fromm International, 1993) p. 54, cited in Wiinikka-Lyons, p.1) reflected on war’s atrocities that attacked not just bodies and property but social virtues and thus community cohesion: “The rifle butt in the back, and the truck ride to the camp cause a distress that cannot be forgotten. That rifle butt shatters everything civilization has ever accomplished, removes all finer human sentiments, and wipes out any sense of justice, compassion and forgiveness.” The trauma of war can thus affect faith in human goodness.

Secondly, he articulates how moral subjectivity and virtue language is potent for making sense of how moral injury affects individuals and communities. Virtues of compassion, availability of forgiveness and the possibility of justice sustain a community. But in the Sarajevo siege there was a constant concern for safety, life was vulnerable, trusted neighbours become informants, friends betrayed to survive, fatalities became part of daily life, homes were tainted with memories of blood and violence, civility turned to suspicion, ethnic tolerance defaulted to vengeance, and morality was undermined by surviving. To understand that experience we need a vocabulary and insights about what it is to be human that reflects what is at stake morally; i.e. moral subjectivity. Dizdarević lamented: “But what we’ll neither forgive nor forget is that they have broken what was best in us; they have taught us to hate. They made us become what we never were. ... The worst of it is that we have learned to hate. We have become suspicious, and don’t trust anyone. We no longer know how to hope. We’ve become cynical and scornful.” (Dizdarević, *Sarajevo*, pp. 34, 102, in Wiinikka-Lyons, pp. 64, 120) This leaves people with no apparent good choices, and the resulting conclusion that one cannot ever be good again. Wiinikka-Lydon says that social sciences cannot explain this despair to the same depth as philosophical, religious and ethical lenses.
Thirdly, Wiinikka-Lydon engages especially with the moral philosophy of Iris Murdoch to understand the effects of political violence. It is the first time her work has been applied to trauma and war. Murdoch contributed to the mid-twentieth-century resurgence of virtue language in philosophy. Hers was a non-theistic approach but drawing on religious ethical discourse and reinterpreting transcendence for secular contexts. She describes moral development with the metaphor of pilgrimage, which involves striving and a ‘pull’ towards goodness, albeit without any taste of the divine as the end. She affirms humanity’s potential for goodness but also the ease with which people can fail to be good given the difficulties of life when society is falling apart – situations in which it can seem goodness is not possible, and after which people feel unable to strive for goodness any longer. Thus, Murdoch describes the resulting experience or existence as one of ‘void’ – a possibility of meaninglessness and/or inhumanity, not ultimately being in control, no longer being able to be the same person who can strive for goodness.

Murdoch’s model of moral development is that as children, and later as adults, we learn ethics from seeing the world and others with a caring attention and then an ability to demonstrate love. Yet horror and terror can cause defensive re-entrenchment, fear of strangers, conceptualising the world as dangerous, and limiting our perception of how much good we can do and share. Wiinikka-Lydon builds on Murdoch’s moral philosophy to argue that moral injury occurs at an individual self- or other-betrayal level and needs clinical treatment; but also, at a juridical level that degrades people’s view of what counts as human dignity which is why rape and torture is such an affront; and at structural levels which suggest the need for questioning and reforming one’s culture and institutions including the military.

A final aspect of the book I appreciated was Wiinikka-Lyon’s high view of research’s potency for imagining pathways for recovery. He writes in conclusion, ‘Often seen as formal and dry, even unemotional, activities such as research, methodology, and analysis can also be places that generate care and assistance. Research can reach out and respond to the sufferings and needs of others, making it a truly humanistic work.’ He continues that ‘even the attempt to try and recognize another’s suffering can itself create new insights, as well as new relationships and ways of being philosophers, ethicists, theologians, social scientists, that are humbly reflective of the imaginative transformation so often needed for the moral repair of injurious subjectivities’ (p.181).

He suggests, further, that what he has done to apply virtue discourse to political violence and moral injury might also apply to understanding and transforming other violence including racism and sexism.

An area Wiinikka-Lydon was not able to treat was the implication of his work for military ethics. There are direct consequences for our concepts of *jus ad bellum, jus in bellum* and *jus post bellum* and the relationship between those issues flowing from his work. For example, how can a satisfactory transition to peace and nation-building happen when events of war have included crimes against humanity that undermine the very moral virtues in people that help build society?

*Moral Injury and the Promise of Virtue* offers original contributions to the moral injury conversation and is valuable reading for caregivers and community leaders supporting those who have suffered moral wounds of war and scholars of conflict and international relations seeking to avoid the tragedy of them occurring in the first place. It is also particularly
relevant for moral theologians interested in understanding war and trauma though philosophical lenses of virtue and moral development and the multi-faceted juridical/ psychological/ philosophical/ structural lenses of moral injury.

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