Interdisciplinarity enfleshed: synergy towards moral repair

Moral injury and moral repair: navigating psychology with Chalcedonian imagination

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Introduction

The starting point for most moral injury discussion is the writing of Jonanthan Shay and his two books - *Achilles in Vietnam* and *Odysseus in America*. These titles indicate that moral injury was 'born' in the space where Shay's clinical psychology and the Greek classics met. The conjunction of disciplines is in moral injury's DNA.

At this conference, except perhaps for 'pure' psychologists and psychiatrists among us, the rest of us come to moral injury from any combination of disciplines. So, we bring to the table: theology, history, ethics, social work, anthropology, philosophy, education, sociology, political science, international studies, leadership/management, visuals and creative arts, performing arts, counselling, pastoral care and more.

As a military chaplain, I was primarily informed, sustained, and ministered from a theological perspective, enlightened by psychological observations and knowledge.

The mix of theology and psychology is useful for military chaplains and for the command. Yet very early in my chaplaincy I realised that it was important to maintain a balance. A chaplain can be 'so heavenly minded so as to have no earthly use', but if they merely acted as an (unqualified) psychologist, even the 'godless' commanders knew that that chaplain has lost their 'saltiness' (Matt. 5.13).

In this paper I seek to explore the mix of theology and psychology I traversed as a chaplain and more recently as a researcher in moral injury. My aim is do this simply, and to act as a catalyst and to seek to start discussions and self-reflections in each of us.

Military chaplains regularly work in interdisciplinary teams. In such contexts there are clear recognitions of boundaries between disciplines, as well as common purpose – we wear the same uniform, but with different insignias – chaplaincy, medical, psychology, for

example. As a researcher exploring moral injury from both theological and psychological perspectives however, this pairing becomes internalised. The advantage is that thinking and reflecting can move freely in my mind between the two disciplines enabling useful synergy and insights. Yet some of the clear boundaries may become blurred, and unexpected blind spots and potholes emerge. Also lurking in this internal space is our personal lens that affects how the pairing of disciplines is understood: our worldview, cultural background, historical perspective and ethnic ways of viewing and thinking.

Such 'stove piping' and confused boundaries are quickly picked up in multi-member interdisciplinary teams. But the effect of their being internalised is that they can often remain hidden.

Psychology and Theology

In military and other chaplaincies, theology and psychology are typically seen as a desirable and a practical mix. On the surface, little daylight between the two may be seen: in valuing individuals, seeking to enhance and sustain each person's contribution to the mission. Yet upon closer reflection, some fundamental differences emerge.

Differences

Psychology sees itself as an evidence-based science, offering particular understandings of the human person. It is driven by qualitatively identifiable and quantitatively measurable observations, analyses, hypotheses, theories, conceptualisations, then therapeutic strategies. It also seeks to be 'value neutral' (more on that later), resisting subscribing to any particular set of values and being 'judgemental'.

Theology, on the other hand, has its focus on divine revelation. Chaplains in the Christian tradition rely on the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as their foundational text to understand and reflect on 'who we are' (anthropology) and 'what we are here on earth for' (teleology). Theology does not seek to be value neutral, but does resist being judgemental, reserving that role to God.

Similar templates apply to chaplains from other traditions, as I understand it.

Familiar words, yet different meaning

The fundamental differences however, between the two disciplines are often clouded because they share familiar words, but with very different meanings.

Take, for example the term ‘guilt’. In psychology it usually means guilty feelings – emotions; while in theology, the term expresses the person’s status before God’s court – ‘Guilty’. The person may or may not experience the emotions of guilt – but in theology, guilt is about a person’s standing before God. Further, ‘shame’ in psychology usually arises from the individual’s relationship with other humans; in theology, it arises in the context of our relationship with God.

The way such terms are dealt with then, in each discipline, is necessarily different. Psychology typically seeks to remove emotions of guilt and shame through therapy; theology looks to God for ways of addressing the status of being guilty, and to take the shame away (Ps. 51).

Cohabiting the same space

Psychology and theology are thus very different disciplines – but they live together within a researcher. How are we to understand the relationship between them in that place of cohabitation? And because that relationship is played out internally, out of plain sight, it is important for there to be clarity.

Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger, a Christian counsellor, suggests a helpful way forward in exploring this relationship between theology and psychology. She speaks of a ‘Chalcedonian imagination’.[1] The Council of Chalcedon, held in AD 451, was where the leaders of the early church, after centuries of debate, hammered out a workable way of understanding and expressing how the Lord Jesus Christ is both wholly divine God, and fully human.

The Council outlined that “the two terms of his identity are not to be confused with, or changed into one another, nor are they to be separated or divided from one another.” (Hunsinger, 64-65).

Applied to the focus of this paper, this means that psychology cannot be morphed into theology, nor theology into psychology; nor can we have psychology translated into theology or theology into psychology. They are distinctive disciplines, yet they cannot be separated when exploring a particular issue, in this case the human experience of moral injury.

[1] Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger, *Spiritual Trauma Care: Theology and Psychology in Dialogue*, ed. Joshua Cockayne, Scott Harrower, and Preston McDaniel Hill, New Studies in Theology and Trauma, (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2025). 64-70.

It is useful to go back to guilt and shame to illustrate this.

While shame may arise in two different relationships – in psychology, in our relationship to others; and in theology, in our relationship with God - the emotions involved are likely to appear largely identical. Furthermore, a person may experience shame in relationship, both to others and to God, at the same time – experienced as a single experience of shame. In pastoral context, I'd be most surprised if you have not come across someone who has said to you - "I am so ashamed, I have let both God and others down in what I did."

In this, shame before others and shame before God cannot be morphed or translated into the other, because they are completely different in origin. Nor can a person involved be separated into two parts, psychological and theological, for they are one person with one experience of 'co-mingled' shame.

Pastoral response, both theological and psychological, best addresses such *shame* with Chalcedonian imagination.

Doing theology and psychology together

At Chalcedon, the conceptual and logical priority was given to the divine nature of Jesus Christ. So, in this Chalcedonian imagination, in my pairing of disciplines, theology is given conceptual and logical priority.

Theology provides me with the who, what and how of human persons, individually and collectively – a theological anthropology. Theology also provides me with a Christian teleology – an understanding of 'what we are here on earth for.' From this framework, I reach out into psychology to capture precise, qualitative and quantitative observations, and consider analyses of how a human person might 'tick', individually and in relationship to others. This becomes part of my data for the theological exploration.

In reading psychology from my theological framework then, I remain conscious that, while sharing similar language, each discipline has specific understandings of meaning – like guilt and shame.

Limitations

Moreover, I also become acutely aware of the inherent limitations of both my disciplines.

For example, persistent critique of psychological discussion of moral injury is that the discipline is limited in the way it can conceptualize moral part of the moral injury.[2] The conceptualisation of morality and values in psychology are formed in the context of human relationships. Morality is understood through a social functioning model, in terms of dynamic, interactive systems that regulate social behaviour, promotes co-operation, and sustains group harmony. This contrasts with theological perspectives, where morality and values are closely related to its anthropology and teleology: humanity understood in relationship to God, to one another, and to creation.[3]

If psychology has serious limitations in discussing moral injury, theology does also. The core difficulty is very much in what it is - *theo*-logy, God-talk.

As such, it communicates primarily with 'Goddie people' - "people who are into God".[4] And sometimes, this 'God-talk' does not even communicate with 'Goddie people'. For example, the starting point of my theological exploration of moral injury was a book by Brian Powers: until then I could not work out the beginning of the thread. But when I first saw its title – *Full Darkness: Original Sin, Moral Injury and War Time Violence* – I nearly left it on the shelf.[5] I thought, "original Sin"? I'm not interested in that! Yet Brian is able to speak of original sin in language even I could understand – beyond the usual stuff about the apple, how the man blamed the woman, the woman blamed the snake, and the snake did not have a leg to stand on.

Helped by Brian, when I now speak about the core of moral injury, I speak of humanity as amazingly created, graced, and gifted by God, yet broken, each and every one of us, and more: it is no mere individual matter. Rather, moral injury is driven by how we are

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[2] Tine Molendijk, Eric-Hans Kramer, and Désirée Verweij, "Moral Aspects of 'Moral Injury': Analysing Conceptualizations on the Role of Morality in Military Trauma," Journal Article, *Journal of Military Ethics* 17, no. 1 (2018). 41. Joseph Wiinikka-Lydon, "Moral Injury as Inherent Political Critique: The Prophetic Possibilities of a New Term," *Political Theology* 18, no. 3 (2017), https://doi.org/10.1080/1462317X.2012.1104205. 222.

[3] I discuss elsewhere how psychology's exploration of moral injury becomes seriously limited by its understanding of morality. Atsushi Shibaoka, "Moral Injury Post-COVID-19: More Than Military? A Theological Perspective," *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 78, no. 1-2 (2024), https://doi.org/10.1177/15423050241247263. Atsushi Shibaoka, "A Theological Model for Moral Injury: Human Brokenness and Divine Grace," *Theology Today* 82, no. 4 (2026/01/01 2025), https://doi.org/10.1177/00405736251385253.

[4] The term was invented by my daughter when she was about 10

[5] Brian S. Powers, *Full Darkness: Original Sin, Moral Injury, and Wartime Violence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2019).

moulded and formed through the brokenness all around us, and by how we each contribute to systems and institutions that are broken, and break people.

That is what moral injury is, at its core.

Theology thus speaks of humanity graced yet broken; psychology observes both the grace and the brokenness in human creature, and how that brokenness and giftedness are manifested in individual human persons, and in relationship to each other in moral injury.

So, by speaking of human giftedness and brokenness, rather than original sin, I seek to communicate beyond 'Goddie people' – and it is important for theology to speak to all peoples beyond the Goddie circle – because what we speak about has been experienced by all people. We have all seen and experienced - the best and the worst of human behaviours, actions, and their consequences.

Theology's claim

There is a Japanese saying "参らぬ仏に罰は当たらぬ." – meaning "you will not be punished by the Buddha you have not worshipped." So why would any theological insight have anything to do with those who live as if they have no faith, let alone Christian faith? That said, many psychologists and counsellors work with people who struggle against their sense of guilt and shame before the God they actually do not believe in. This is quite akin to how killing in war causes a deep sense of guilt for combatants, even though violence and killing were a part of what they were legally tasked to do. We humans are deeply complex, layered, and conflicted creatures.

So, signs of human brokenness and all that this implies, as well as the grace-filled and gifted goodness of humanity, are evident not only in theology, but also in psychological observations. And Christian faith seeks to make sense of this complexity in God who is revealed "through the creation, maintenance, and governance of the entire world."[6]

The claim made here is that divine revelation, Christian anthropology and teleology enable the joining of the dots, of what we observe and experience - to arrive at a coherent conceptualization of moral injury, and thus strategies for moral repair.

[6] Article II, Belgic Confession of 1561. G. C. Berkouwer, *General Revelation*, Studies in Dogmatics, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1955). fn 16, 290.

The personal lens

At the beginning of this paper, I mentioned that also lurking in that opaque space of paired disciplines was a personal perspective. While it is important to have clarity over what theology is, and what psychology is, and how they relate to each other - it is also important to have clarity on own personal lens.

Our personal lenses exist, even before we begin our theological or psychological explorations. I pick and choose, often quite unconsciously, what ideas and topics in theology I might find curious and come to engage with – the earlier example of the topic of original sin, being a case in point – I was not interested! Even before I get to the interdisciplinary space, I see the world through my worldview, my personal history, culture, and ethnic perspectives – some people might call them bias!

And I believe that this is at work in every person – even in that 'value-neutral' space of psychology.

Conclusion - enfleshed interdisciplinarity

So, let me conclude. I stated at the beginning, that my aim for this paper is to be a catalyst. That being the case: -

- What are the disciplines that you navigate in your research?
- In that opaque space of internalized interdisciplinarity, do you have a clear recognition of how they interact in your thinking?
- What might be the limitations of your respective disciplines?
- Are you able to identify elements in your personal lens - your experience, history, culture and ethnicity? How do they influence you?

Chalcedonian Christology speaks of how the divine and human natures come together in unity, in the person of Christ, the incarnate Son of God. So it is that when theology and psychology come together in unity in the person of the researcher, the interdisciplinary pair becomes truly enfleshed.

So, this is my creed I have come to confess:

> As a researcher exercising all my theological and psychological acuity, I do not stand outside the tent of human brokenness looking in, but well inside. I am not an outside expert, consultant, or policy advocate to inform, advise,

> educate or even demand. I am a witness and a companion with all who struggle with experience of moral injury.
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> While I am continually grateful for grace and giftedness so evident all around us, I am also acutely conscious of my own and our collective brokenness of humanity, communities, and institutions – military organizations, academic institutions and churches. None of us stands outside.
>
> Those institutions have shaped and moulded us in their brokenness; in turn, we each contribute to the deforming and misshaping of others, to their PMIEs, through our own brokenness.

So where is the moral repair in this, you might ask – where is the light in this rather dark picture of brokenness I paint? My clear response is – I find the light in each and every researcher and pastoral care provider pouring our energy and commitment into seeking moral repair, and to build resilience.

We have just celebrated Easter – from the perspective of moral injury, the day I focus most on, is the Holy Saturday, between Good Friday and Easter Day.

That was the day when Jesus was truly dead. Yet in the darkness of that tomb, behind the rock, somehow, in the excess of death, an impossible light, the new life flickers.

I see the flickering of that light in each of our work, and I know that life that reflects what is truly good is found in the death that remains.[7]

[7] Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A theology of Remaining* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010). 129.

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