

KILLING FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Moral Injury and Just War

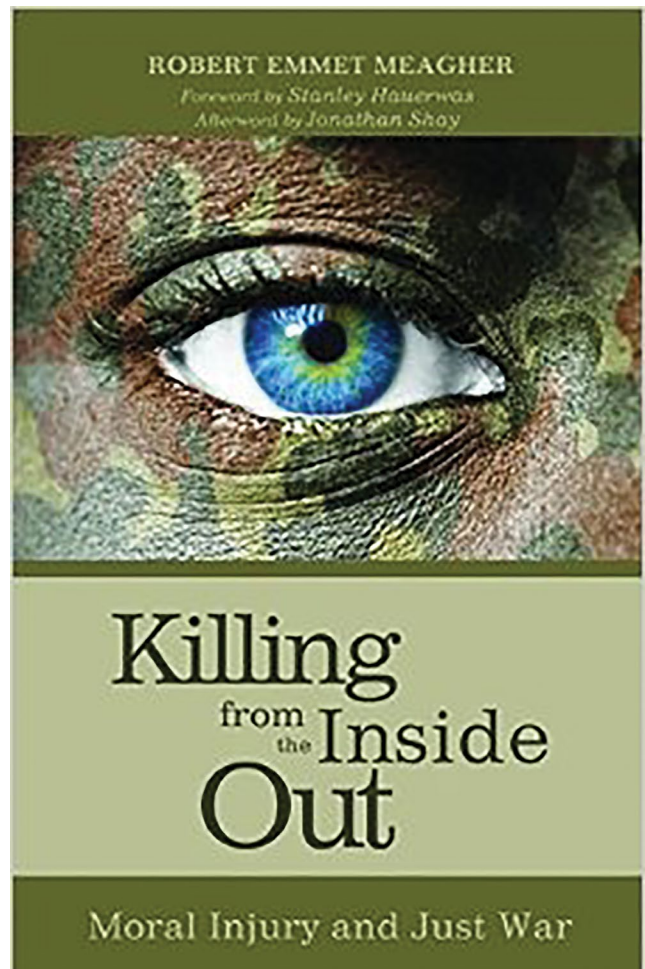
Robert Emmet Meagher; Cascade Books, Eugene, Oregon, 2014, 190 pages

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In a 2006 book, Robert Meagher, a brilliant classical scholar, delivered the definitive translation of Euripides' play *Herakles Gone Mad* and argued that Hercules' killing his beloved wife and children during a bout of post-combat madness sheds light on the timeless psychological horrors of war. *Killing from the Inside Out* examines the psychological effects of combat from another angle, as it pertains to just war theory (JWT) and the theory's impact on "moral injury."

The title comes from the poignant story of Noah Pierce. A young infantry soldier during the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Pierce became distressed by several incidents, such as his accidentally crushing an Iraqi child under his Bradley fighting vehicle. After Pierce committed suicide in 2007, his mother said, "he couldn't forgive himself for some of the things he did" and that the kind of wound he had "kills you from the inside out." As Meagher correctly describes in *Killing*, Pierce's story is just one of many attesting to the power of moral injury, a condition causing self-destructive behaviors such as drug abuse, domestic violence, and suicide.

Meagher begins his analysis with the roots of JWT in early western civilization. The concept of sin, he shows, was prefigured in the Greek concept of "miasma" (moral



pollution). To the Greeks, killing always polluted the killer, regardless of intentions or the act's perceived justice. This pollution required ritual cleansing, what Christians would later call "absolution," and cleansing required suffering, read "penance." Great suffering even transmogrified polluted heroes such as Oedipus and Hercules into "heroes," or even gods.

Turning to early Christianity, Meagher argues that Jesus' life and words clearly promoted pacifism, and such was long the predominant understanding among Christians. This understanding shifted with the conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine and Rome's adoption of Christianity as the state religion. Quickly, the "Lamb of God" was redesigned as the "Lord of Hosts." Ambrose of Milan and his more influential protégé, Augustine of Hippo, forged a new interpretation of the gospels—one focused on the "spirit" rather than the "letter" of their meaning—to legitimize Christians' serving in the empire's wars. Their concept of "just war" was much more restrictive than it would eventually become, however. Ambrose and Augustine, for example, strongly condemned killing in self-defense.

During the Middle Ages, the church grew more powerful than the state. Meagher describes how this led to the concept of just war becoming more elastic. Medieval scholastics such as Thomas Aquinas justified defensive and other wars through the principle of double effect. This dangerous principle can justify just about anything as long as one's intentions are "pure." Such dogma enabled the crusades, where a warrior's every sin found pardon, and JWT went, as Meagher vividly puts it, "stark raving mad."

Meagher then examines the evolution of JWT from the medieval period to "Early Modern Europe." He discusses the "Peace of God" and the "Truce of God," early versions of JWT that narrowly (and unsuccessfully) focused on limiting Christian-on-Christian violence. There is the great humanist scholar Francisco de Victoria, who both condemned and unintentionally helped justify the Spanish conquest of the New World. There is Grotius, one of the founders of international law, who "understood war in judicial terms" and who "was no doubt personally

troubled and saddened by the low standards of conduct that legal war condones."

Meagher ultimately concludes that JWT has served only to legitimize and inspire war. Also, insidiously, this concept has kept veterans afflicted with moral injury from getting the help they need. After all, a nation asks, how can its veterans suffer from moral trauma when the cause for which they fought was just?

The answer to these problems is not to revise JWT or improve its implementation, Meagher says. The theory is inherently flawed. Any view of war as sometimes virtuous is essentially untruthful. War is more accurately referred to, at best, as "necessary" rather than "just." He views combat veterans as an important resource for moving nations beyond JWT, for they know best "the moral cost of any war" and are far less likely "to concede that a war of necessity is by definition a just war."

In the wake of two foreign wars of dubious value but of unquestionably high physical, psychological, and moral costs, Meagher's voice is well worth listening to. After all, the self-righteous rhetoric that accompanies American soldiers to war has not always been all that far removed from the language of jihad. Chaplains often pray for victory, and leaders regularly tell soldiers that they are the greatest warriors of the greatest army of the greatest nation in the history of the world. Perhaps Meagher is right. Perhaps our nation should choose its wars much more carefully. And perhaps, to achieve the best possible outcomes from a truly necessary conflict, we American soldiers must understand ourselves not as self-exalting holy warriors but more fully and rationally, better accounting for who we are, what we do, and what we do to ourselves when we wage war.

Even if readers do not agree completely with Meagher, his words are a salutary corrective to many overweening myths. One of the most alluring and enduring of these myths is that we can kill without being killed ourselves. War, as Meagher makes clear, kills not only those it buries in the ground. It just as surely kills the souls of warriors who, having marched off to war and moral injury, return home, heads held high while the music plays and their loved ones cheer, yet feeling inside they are forever lost. ■

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