

Investigating Moral Injury: Thinking Beyond the Law-Conscience Binary

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Abstract: In *Dust in the Blood*, Jessica Coblentz notes the insufficiency of theodical approaches to theology to account for depressive suffering. Instead, she proposes a theology of depression that makes use of narrative-phenomenological portraits and draws new insights on what Christian discipleship means in the context of depressive suffering. In this article, I employ Coblentz’s framework to interrogate another area of contemporary theology. Debates about the moral authority of conscience are largely unresolved. In order to confront some points of intractable disagreement in these debates and consider a way beyond them, I study firsthand experiences of moral injury. Jonathon Shay, the clinical psychiatrist who coined the term, defined moral injury as “a betrayal of what’s right by someone who holds legitimate authority in a high stakes situation.” From patterns in firsthand experiences of moral injury, I propose a respective understanding of conscience. I argue that this understanding of conscience can direct theologians beyond impasses in Catholic moral theology.

IN THEIR ARTICLE, “BEYOND THE LAW AND CONSCIENCE BINARY in Catholic Moral Thought,” David Cloutier and Robert Koerpel described contemporary moral theology as at an impasse. This is most plainly exhibited in intractable disagreements over divorce and remarriage about *Amoris Laetitia*. Cloutier and Koerpel traced the impasse to what they term the “law-conscience binary.” Today, law and conscience are defined in opposition to each other: conscience is proposed as a corrective alternative to law and vice versa.¹ This forms a binary: defining law and conscience in this way makes law and conscience “the site of conflict between two different wills, where each will competes with the other’s notion of moral authority.”²

As long as this binary persists in Catholic moral theology, resolution in debates like the one surrounding *Amoris Laetitia* is difficult to imagine. To think beyond the law-conscience binary, I will employ what Jessica Coblentz called “narrative phenomenological

¹ David Cloutier and Robert Koerpel, “Beyond the Law-Conscience Binary in Catholic Moral Thought,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 10, no. 2 (2021): 176.

² Cloutier and Koerpel, “Beyond the Law-Conscience Binary,” 177.

portraits.” In *Dust in the Blood*, Coblentz developed a theology of depression grounded in narrative phenomenological portraits.³ By considering the way conscience is described in narrative phenomenological portraits of moral injury, I argue that the insight gained into conscience can aid moral theologians today to think beyond the law-conscience binary.

THEOLOGY AND DEPRESSION: NARRATIVE-PHENOMENOLOGICAL PORTRAITS

Noting the prevalence of depression and its increasing rate, Coblentz recounted her surprise at discovering the lacunae of theological resources discussing depression.⁴ To address these lacunae, Coblentz described how she first turned to various studies of suffering in Christian theology. These studies, dominated by “rational proofs, theodical explanations, and intellectual apologies,” primarily focused on justifying the existence of suffering in view of a good God.⁵ Noting how these studies have “explain[ed] away the grave horrors of history,” Coblentz asserted these ways of studying suffering as insufficient.⁶ As an alternative, Coblentz turned to theologians who understood the need to give an account of these horrors: Johann Baptist Metz, Dorothee Sölle, and Edward Schillebeeckx. These theologians address suffering through narrative theological approaches. According to Coblentz, these approaches “uphold the particularities of suffering, including its contradictions and fragmentations.”⁷ This is to say, where some approaches to theologies of suffering depersonalize and disembodify those suffering, narrative theological approaches account for the experience of suffering in its context and complexities.⁸

³ Coblentz has extended this way of doing theology beyond *Dust in the Blood*. The following articles by Coblentz both explore and rely on this inductive way of doing theology and/or further investigate the relationship between theology, ethics, mental health, and psychology: “What Can Theology Offer Psychology? Some Considerations in the Context of Depression?,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 9, no. 1 (2020): 2–19; “I. Theological Reflection on White Women’s Misery,” *Horizons* 50, no. 1 (2023): 180–190, doi.org/10.1017/hor.2023.6; “The Possibilities of Grace amid Persistent Depression,” *Theological Studies* 80, no. 3 (2019): 554–571, doi.org/10.1177/0040563919857184; “Ghosts in the Office: The Ecclesiological and Soteriological Implications of Stereotype Threat among Women in Catholic Theology,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 33, no. 1 (2017): 127–135, doi.org/10.2979/jfemistudreli.33.1.11.

⁴ Jessica Coblentz, *Dust in the Blood: A Theology of Life with Depression* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press Academic, 2022), 6–7.

⁵ Coblentz, *Dust in the Blood*, 7.

⁶ Coblentz, *Dust in the Blood*, 7–8.

⁷ Coblentz, *Dust in the Blood*, 8.

⁸ Coblentz, *Dust in the Blood*, 10–11.

In her own theological approach, Coblentz accounts for this personal dimension by reflecting on firsthand experiences. Here, she is motivated by the “epistemological gains” made by liberation and political theologians like Ada María Isasi-Díaz.⁹ Isasi-Díaz’s *mujerista* theology reflected on the everyday experience of Latina women. The knowledge gained through reflection on these experiences informs how Isasi-Díaz and other *mujerista* theologians understand God and the world. According to Coblentz, firsthand experiences provide insight into dimensions of an experience that those who have not shared these experiences would not be “inclined to apprehend.”¹⁰ By taking a narrative theological approach that prioritizes firsthand accounts of depression, Coblentz’s resulting theology of depression accounts for the personal and embodied dimensions of human experience.

To organize the first-person accounts of depression presented in the first chapter for theological study, Coblentz discerned patterns. The pattern that Coblentz noticed, which grounded her subsequent theology of depression, was an experience of unhomelikeness. She arrived at this description by subjecting first-person accounts of depression to phenomenological analysis.¹¹ Following Husserlian phenomenologists, Coblentz attended to the subjective experience of self as a lived-body (*Leib*). To do this, she bracketed any causal frameworks through which an experience would be described (e.g., genetic make-up or proper nutrients). Then, she studied the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*) of the subject, or the world as it presents itself to the subject.¹² This method allows phenomenologists to be attentive to different moods (*Stimmungen*). Mood here refers to what grounds or pre-conditions the way a subject experiences the world. Drawing from Heideggerian phenomenology, Coblentz argued that depression is a shift in mood (*Stimmung*): it shifts in a pre-thematic way how someone interacts with the world.¹³ In contrast to a mood of “at-home-ness” (*Heimlichkeit*) and experiences of connection and shared belonging, unhomelikeness (*Unheimlichkeit*) brings a denuding of meaning and loss of bodily resonance with the world.¹⁴

According to Coblentz, the phenomenological understanding of the state of unhomelikeness resonates with the patterns that emerge from first-person accounts of depression. For example, like unhomelikeness, depression leaves people with an absence of familiarity in

⁹ Coblentz, *Dust in the Blood*, 9.

¹⁰ Coblentz, *Dust in the Blood*, 9.

¹¹ Coblentz, *Dust in the Blood*, 35.

¹² Coblentz, *Dust in the Blood*, 35.

¹³ Coblentz, *Dust in the Blood*, 38.

¹⁴ Coblentz, *Dust in the Blood*, 39–40.

their everyday lives. Unhomelikeness also resonates with the experience of radical isolation by those who suffer from depression. Depression, like unhomelikeness, resists meaningfulness. Additionally, unhomelikeness accounts for the feeling of permanence and helpless entrapment those who suffer from depression experience.¹⁵ Coblentz deemed this description of depression as unhomelikeness a much richer foundation for a theology of depression.

In *Dust in the Blood*, Coblentz then proceeded to draw theological insights and conclusions by relating depression under the description of unhomelikeness to the Scriptures. First, Coblentz considered the story of Hagar. Unlike popular theories surveyed in the second chapter that rely on understanding depression as a moral evil and theodical approaches that premise a distant and uninvolved God, this story reveals God as the one who “sees and hears.”¹⁶ Describing Hagar’s story, Coblentz said, “Her suffering remains illogical, and God is nevertheless working and present in their midst.”¹⁷ Hagar’s experience of her own suffering and relation to God become paradigmatic in Coblentz’s theology of depression. Faith prompts the person suffering from depression not to necessarily find an answer for why suffering is happening but to discover the radical presence of God.¹⁸ From this, Coblentz concluded to new possibilities for understanding salvation in the context of the wilderness of depressive suffering: “to hope against hope—to *hope* that salvation will come even when they cannot possibly perceive *what* salvation will look like.”¹⁹

Coblentz’s proposal of what salvation means in the context of the suffering of depression has implications for Christian discipleship. As disciples, Christians seek to imitate God as their teacher.²⁰ In Coblentz’s theology, where God is understood as the one who sees and hears, Christian discipleship thus entails things like unimposing accompaniment,²¹ social transformation—and even revolution—of the injustices that sometimes enable depression,²² providing access to mental health resources,²³ and overcoming stigmatization.²⁴ To do this, it is imperative that Christians cultivate a narrative that encourages Christians to “stay with” their unresolved suffering like Hagar and lean into the inability to reconcile divine benevolence with

¹⁵ Coblentz, *Dust in the Blood*, 41–42.

¹⁶ Coblentz, *Dust in the Blood*, 175.

¹⁷ Coblentz, *Dust in the Blood*, 176.

¹⁸ Coblentz, *Dust in the Blood*, 177–178.

¹⁹ Coblentz, *Dust in the Blood*, 194.

²⁰ Coblentz, *Dust in the Blood*, 200.

²¹ Coblentz, *Dust in the Blood*, 201–203.

²² Coblentz, *Dust in the Blood*, 208.

²³ Coblentz, *Dust in the Blood*, 209.

²⁴ Coblentz, *Dust in the Blood*, 213.

the horrors of suffering.²⁵ Emerging out of her theology of depression, Coblenz proposed a distinct definition of salvation that rivals salvation construed in theodical approaches that seek to reconcile God's goodness and the evils of suffering: "salvation consists not in resolving suffering through the assertion of quick theological fixes but rather in supporting possibilities for survival and quality of life through offerings of theological, social, and material resources."²⁶

By studying firsthand accounts of depression and subjecting them to phenomenological inquiry, Coblenz proposed a definition of salvation that overcomes many shortcomings faced by theodical approaches. Her definition honors the subjectivity of the human person rather than flattens or minimizes the experience of suffering by "withhold[ing] the imposition of meaning and divine justifications."²⁷ She is also able to account for the unique wisdom gained by those who suffer from depression. Through an impact on mood, those who suffer from depression have a unique lifeworld experience. Being shaped by unhomelikeness, those who suffer from depression can gain insight that others may have a difficult time grasping. According to Coblenz, those who suffer from depression are uniquely posed to understand the salvific character of hoping in the wilderness.²⁸ In the proceeding sections, I will apply Coblenz's method to the experience of moral injury. By studying moral injury in this way, I argue that the unique insights into conscience gained can aid theologians who want to think beyond the law-conscience binary.

A PORTRAIT OF MORAL INJURY

Today, moral injury is used to refer to a variety of situations whereby someone experiences "moral fracturing."²⁹ Richardson, Lamson, and Hutto use the term "moral fracturing" to describe the experience veterans/former service members who have experienced moral injury commonly have of one's "whole moral base and moral

²⁵ Coblenz, *Dust in the Blood*, 208–209.

²⁶ Coblenz, *Dust in the Blood*, 217.

²⁷ Coblenz, *Dust in the Blood*, 217.

²⁸ Coblenz, *Dust in the Blood*, 194.

²⁹ Natalie M. Richardson, Angela L. Lamson, and Olivia Hutto, "'My Whole Base and Moral Understanding Was Shattered': A Phenomenological Understanding of Key Definitional Constructs of Moral Injury," *Traumatology* 28, no. 4 (2022): 463, 466–467, doi.org/10.1037/trm0000364. In this article, the authors conduct a study on firsthand experiences of moral injury. They found that the self-description of "fracturing" or "shattering" is highly common amongst participants. Throughout this article, I will refer to this first-person description of moral injury. Grounding the argument on first-person accounts allows it to be an exercise in Coblenz's method of reflecting in firsthand experiences to gain theological insight.

understanding [being] shattered.”³⁰ This phenomenon is accompanied by guilt, demoralization, and isolation. In working with veterans/former service members, Richardson, Lamson, and Hutto found that this fracturing is the result of a choice that contradicts what the human person believed to be good in a high stakes situation. The choice executed in these situations would be considered undesirable and uncharacteristic by her if she was not facing some constraint. Typically, this context involves some authority that demands, coerces, or strongly encourages the choice executed.³¹

The term “moral injury” was coined in the context of therapeutic interventions for veterans returning from the Vietnam War. Working at the Veteran Affairs (VA) Boston Outpatient Clinic, a long-term outpatient program for combat veterans, Jonathan Shay, a clinical psychiatrist, identified common experiences among his clients. He noticed many similarities between the veterans’ experiences and the Homeric characters’ experience in the *Iliad*—particularly in the experience of “betrayal of what’s right by a commander and the onset of the berserk state.”³² Through their work in clinical contexts, Shay and Munroe argued that the veterans’ postwar experience is centered around the betrayal they experienced in war. These authors noted that many of their clients trace their present suffering to the exploitation and betrayal they experienced by those who held credentials over them and responsibility for their well-being during the war.³³

In their chapter in *Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: A Comprehensive Text*, Shay and Munroe used the term “moral injury” to describe this experience of betrayal commonly felt by veterans.³⁴ While “moral injury” was initially used in a passing way, not intended as a novel point of development in clinical research, it quickly attracted attention because of its ability to name key components of veterans’ common experiences.³⁵ Informed by their clinical practice, Shay and Munroe further developed the idea of moral injury and propose the following three-part definition: “1) a betrayal of what’s right; 2) by someone

³⁰ Richardson, Lamson, and Hutto, “‘My Whole Base and Moral Understanding,’” 466.

³¹ Richardson, Lamson, and Hutto, “‘My Whole Base and Moral Understanding,’” 463–467.

³² Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), xiii.

³³ Jonathan Shay and James Munroe, “Group and Milieu Therapy for Veterans with Complex Posttraumatic Stress Disorder,” in *Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: A Comprehensive Text*, ed. Phillip A. Saigh and J. Douglas Bremner (Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon, 1999), 392.

³⁴ Shay and Munroe, “Group and Milieu Therapy for Veterans,” 391–392.

³⁵ Jonathan Shay, “Moral Injury,” *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 31, no. 2 (2014): 183, doi.org/10.1037/a0036090.

who holds legitimate authority; 3) in a high stakes situation.”³⁶ In Shay’s understanding of the concept, moral injury primarily relates to a political wound: it is something inflicted in relation to others.³⁷

In the Vietnam War, Shay argued that moral injury occurred when subordinates executed the command of their superiors even though it was contrary to what the subordinates considered to be the moral decision. A sense of betrayal was commonly felt after due to the experience of seeing that the choice made was the best or only option and subsequent feelings of intense guilt and shame. Similar to how Homer describes in the *Iliad*, the experiences of Vietnam veterans show that moral injury impacts people in a lasting way—well beyond the moment it is inflicted.³⁸ Shay and Munroe listed seven common symptoms of their clients afflicted by moral injury: altered affect regulation; altered consciousness; altered self-perception—including a sense of helplessness, shame, guilt, and self-blame; altered perception; altered relations with others, such as repeatedly searching for a rescuer; altered systems of meaning; and somatization.³⁹

Where previous terminology such as “soldier’s heart” focused on somatic effects⁴⁰ and current terminology like PTSD focuses on the psycho-somatic symptoms and hyper-arousal of veterans,⁴¹ moral injury focuses on the moral and social dimensions of the postwar experience. By describing the postwar experience of veterans in terms of moral injury, Shay and Munroe understood the loss of capacity for social trust as the key manifestation of the psychological injuries endured as a result of war.⁴² As Shay said, “The essential injuries in combat PTSD are moral and social and so the central treatment must be moral and social. The best treatment restores control to the survivor and actively encourages communalization of the trauma. Healing is done *by* survivors, not *to* survivors.”⁴³

³⁶ Shay, “Moral Injury,” 183.

³⁷ Shay and Munroe, “Group and Milieu Therapy for Veterans,” 392.

³⁸ Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*, 6.

³⁹ Shay and Munroe, “Group and Milieu Therapy for Veterans,” 392–393.

⁴⁰ Kathleen Logothetis Thompson, “Healing the Unseen Wounds of War: Treating Mental Trauma in the Civil War and the Great War,” in *Wars Civil and Great: The American Experience in the Civil War and World War I*, ed. David J. Silbey and Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2023), 176–177.

⁴¹ Suzanne Gordon, *The Battle for Veterans’ Healthcare: Dispatches from the Front Lines of Policy Making and Patient Care* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017), 75–78. American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th edition, revised text (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association, 2022), F43.10, doi.org/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425787.x07_Trauma_and_Stressor_Related_Disorders.

⁴² Shay and Munroe, “Group and Milieu Therapy for Veterans,” 392.

⁴³ Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*, 179.

Following Shay's definition of moral injury, a variety of scholars and clinicians have continued to develop moral injury from a variety of contexts beyond the battlefield.⁴⁴ There are two common themes in new definitions I would like to emphasize as points of development. The first theme is typified by Christopher Hansen. Hansen described the experience of moral injury as having two parts: 1) the personal transgression of one's own moral values; 2) the betrayal, by "a person in leadership, of an ideal, or a cause."⁴⁵ Those who experience moral injury experience conflicts at both the personal and social levels of moral agency as well as a conflict between these two parts. Shay argued that these conflicts relate to the experiences of paranoia and difficulty relating to others with whom one previously had an intimate relationship those who experience moral injury tend to suffer.⁴⁶ Defining the postwar experience in this way creates an account that identifies not only conflict or distress at the level of personal moral agency but also at the social level as well as in the interplay between the personal and social dimensions of moral agency.

Second, contemporary definitions of moral injury have clarified the locus point of the injury. Through clinical practice and reflection, this locus point has come to be understood as the human person's self-identity. In "The Trauma of Moral Injury: Beyond the Battlefield," Eileen Dombo and others argue that when chosen and executed intentionally, behavior is understood to be an extension of the self. To choose an action one believes to be immoral can result in negative self-appraisals. Due to the intense and traumatic context of moral injuries, these negative self-appraisals threaten the integrity of the human person's moral schema and result in difficulty navigating the world. In Dombo, Gray, and Early's clinical experience and research, the injury does not terminate in the past. In fact, the injury is perpetuated through experiences of guilt and shame.⁴⁷ By identifying moral injuries as harming the human person's self-identity, Dombo, Early, and Gray account for both moral injury's threat to the integrity of the human person's moral schema and the experience of "damage to the cognitive structure of the moral self."⁴⁸

⁴⁴ For more on other contexts for moral injury in addition to war, I recommend the following: Eileen A. Dombo, Cathleen Gray, and Barbara P. Early, "The Trauma of Moral Injury: Beyond the Battlefield," *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought* 32, no. 3 (2013): 202–206, doi.org/10.1080/15426432.2013.801732.

⁴⁵ Christopher Hansen, "Glimmers of the Infinite: The Tragedy of Moral Injury," *Theology and Science: A New Theological Anthropology for Developing Resiliency and Healing from Combat* 17, no. 1 (2019): 65, doi.org/10.1111/dial.12454.

⁴⁶ Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*, 33–34.

⁴⁷ Dombo, Gray, and Early, "The Trauma of Moral Injury," 200–202.

⁴⁸ Dombo, Gray, and Early, "The Trauma of Moral Injury," 202.

MORAL INJURY AND CONSCIENCE

While the previous section presents various descriptions of moral injury based on first-person accounts, this section—following Coblenz—seeks to identify patterns among them. One way I see scholars accounting for the patterns in first-person accounts of moral injury is by relating the experience to conscience. While conscience is a concept more properly at home in theology, scholars from a variety of disciplines have taken to describing moral injury in terms of “conscience” to account for the depth and pervasiveness of suffering experienced in moral injury. Today’s conscience-based descriptions vary greatly. While Marcus Mescher defined moral injury as an “abuse of conscience,”⁴⁹ Liana Lentz and others described it as compromising conscience.⁵⁰ By using the “Stress of Conscience Questionnaire (SCQ),” Erin Sugrue associated moral injury with a troubling of conscience.⁵¹ Referencing Litz and Shay, K. C. Kalmbach and others described moral injury as a crisis of conscience.⁵² Ben Onnik and others described moral injury as a “lasting insult to one’s conscience,”⁵³ while Rita Brock called it the “trauma of moral conscience.”⁵⁴

Two recent articles developed the experience of moral injury in relation to conscience beyond passing definitions. The ability of their descriptions to account for fundamental portions of the narrative-

⁴⁹ Marcus Mescher, “Toward a Taxonomy of Moral Injury: Confronting the Harm Caused by Clergy Sexual Abuse,” *Journal of the Society for Christian Ethics* 43, no. 1 (2023): 80.

⁵⁰ Liana M. Lentz, Lorraine Smith-MacDonald, David Malloy, R. Nicholas Carleton, and Suzette Brémault-Phillips, “Compromised Conscience: A Scoping Review of Moral Injury Among Firefighters, Paramedics, and Police Officers,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (2021): 639781, doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.639781.

⁵¹ Erin Sugrue, “Moral Injury Among Professionals in K-12 Education,” *American Educational Research Journal* 57, no. 1 (2020): 51–52, doi.org/10.3102/0002831219848690. For more on the Stress of Conscience Questionnaire (SCQ), see Ann-Louise Glasberg, Sture Eriksson, Vera Dahlqvist, Elisabeth Lindahl, Gunilla Strandberg, Anna Söderberg, Venke Sørli, and Astrid Norberg, “Development and Initial Validation of the Stress of Conscience Questionnaire,” *Nursing Ethics* 13 (2006): 633–648, doi.org/10.1177/0969733006069698.

⁵² K. C. Kalmbach, Erin D. Basinger, Bryan Bayles, Randee Schmitt, Victoria Nunez, Bret A. Moore, and Richard G. Tedeschi, “Moral Injury in Post-9/11 Combat-Experienced Military Veterans: A Qualitative Thematic Analysis,” *Psychological Services* 21, no. 2 (2023): 2, doi.org/10.1037/ser0000792; B. T. Litz, Nathan Stein, Eileen Delaney, Leslie Lebowitz, William P. Nash, Caroline Silva, and Shira Maguen, “Moral Injury and Moral Repair in War Veterans,” *Clinical Psychology Review* 29, no. 8 (2009): 695–706, doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2009.07.003; Shay, “Moral injury,” 182–191.

⁵³ Ben Onnik, Matthew C. Correll, Andrew Correll, and Terry Correll, “Psychotherapy’s Role in Evaluating the Invisible Wounds of Moral Injury,” *Innovations in Clinical Neuroscience* 21, nos. 1–3 (2024): 36–42.

⁵⁴ Brock, “Moral Conscience, Moral Injury, and Rituals for Recovery,” 44.

phenomenological portrait of moral injury demonstrates the helpfulness of describing moral injury in relation to conscience. In “Toward a Taxonomy of Moral Injury,” Mescher argued that considering conscience allows descriptions of moral injury to move beyond merely describing an entanglement of trauma to also give an account of estrangement from one’s identity.⁵⁵ Second, in “Moral Conscience, Moral Injury, and Rituals for Recovery,” Rita Brock gives an account of the experience of moral injury in terms of being unable to sustain clear distinctions between good and evil.⁵⁶ At the same time, these descriptions are at odds with each other. They reveal a looming issue for scholarship on moral injury. As Mescher argued, the relationship between conscience and moral injury has been “insufficiently considered.”⁵⁷

Rather than dismissing these accounts of moral injury because of their contradictions, I propose that when studied together they illuminate a thick description of moral injury’s impact on conscience. This description proposes a pattern (as Coblentz describes it) conducive to theological reflection. Moral injury impacts conscience in four distinct moments. First, prior to moral injury the human person has made judgments about what is good and evil. She carries these judgments, made by conscience, into the experience of moral injury. These moral judgments are central to the experience the human person has of the world. While judgments are held in the deeply personal way described above, the human person forms and makes these judgments in the context of her engagement with a world that is social and in the context of her relationships with others.

From conscience, the human person then acts on these judgments in the context of her daily life and action. In the event of a moral injury, the human person faces a dilemma given her personal beliefs about good and evil. This judgment arises in the context of war and more immediately the command of an authority figure. The inability to maintain the relationship while choosing what one believes to be right poses an ethical dilemma: conscience is troubled. In moral injury when the choice is made to violate her sense of what is good, she transgresses her conscience. Given that her decision is heavily influenced by the particular context she faces, this transgression is a compromised one.

After the event that precipitates moral injury, the human person commonly identifies herself as “fractured.”⁵⁸ As Brock describes, she

⁵⁵ Mescher, “Toward a Taxonomy of Moral Injury,” 80–81.

⁵⁶ Brock, “Moral Conscience, Moral Injury, and Rituals for Recovery,” 40.

⁵⁷ Mescher, “Toward a Taxonomy of Moral Injury,” 91.

⁵⁸ Richardson, Lamson, and Hutto, “My Whole Base and Moral Understanding Was Shattered,” 463, 466–467.

is unable to sustain distinctions between good and evil. In the event of a moral injury the human person's conscience has been violated. This violation occurs in the context of a complicated relationship with others and their beliefs about what is good. After this event, she also has difficulty connecting with others. Put another way, her self-betrayal in the particular context of the moral injury engenders social mistrust. One of the tasks of recovery is then to foster a restoration of conscience. As the practices described above show, by regaining social trust and addressing the experience of self-betrayal, people who suffer moral injury may experience a restoration of their ability to sustain distinctions between good and evil.

By considering moral injury in four distinct moments—prior to the moral injury, in the choice that precipitates moral injury, in the effects of moral injury, and in recovery from moral injury—a coherent understanding of conscience emerges. Moral judgments and choices are made from the depth of one's being in a very personal way. In each of these instances, the choice that precipitates moral injury is experienced as implicating her whole self or self-identity. Additionally, in each of these stages the judgments about what is good or evil are made in the context of relationships with others. Judgments of conscience are made in a personal way in the context of social world and community. While wholly personal, conscience is not individualistic. Imitating Coblentz's framework, this understanding of conscience will guide the discussion of conscience in contemporary moral theology in the next section.

CONSCIENCE IN CONTEMPORARY CATHOLIC MORAL THEOLOGY

Today, conscience is employed in some of the most intractable disagreements in moral theology. As previously discussed, some of the most contentious debates in contemporary Catholic moral theology—like those about divorce and remarriage—have to do with rival definitions of conscience.⁵⁹ According to Cloutier and Koerpel, today's definition of conscience is a development of definitions proposed in the twentieth century.⁶⁰ In the latter half of the twentieth

⁵⁹ For more on the role of conscience in debates about *Amoris Laetitia*, see Conor Kelly, "The Role of the Moral Theologian in the Church: A Proposal in Light of *Amoris Laetitia*," *Theological Studies* 77, no. 4 (2016): 922–948, doi.org/10.1177/0040563916666824; Todd A. Salzman and Michael G. Lawler, "*Amoris Laetitia* and Catholic Morals," *The Furrow* 67, no. 12 (2016): 666–675.

⁶⁰ Cloutier and Koerpel traced the contemporary understanding of conscience and the law-conscience binary to medieval debates over Augustine's understanding of divine reason and will. They argued that understanding the law-conscience binary's genealogy is imperative to thinking beyond it. For the full genealogical description of

century, there was a turn in Catholic moral theology that aimed to create a “more personalistic, pastoral, and biblically based system of moral theology that [was] as concerned with one’s fundamental relationship with Christ.”⁶¹ Essential to this turn was the definition of conscience in *Gaudium et Spes* as “the most secret core and sanctuary of a man,” where “he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths.”⁶²

This definition of conscience proposed in *Gaudium et Spes* was deeply informed by the work of Bernard Häring. As Cloutier and Koerpel argued, in Häring’s postwar European context recovering conscience was a necessary response to the two world wars and turbulent social changes of the 1960s.⁶³ Häring sought a Catholic moral theology that moved away from “‘objectivist’ and ‘positivist’ views of law to something more personal and pastoral.”⁶⁴ In Cloutier and Koerpel’s account, the personalist turn responds to the objectivism and legalism of the manualist tradition of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.⁶⁵ The personalist turn was intended as a corrective to the way the late manualist tradition obscured the subject.

Today, contemporary Catholic moral theology owes much to this personalist turn. According to Cloutier and Koerpel, this turn is responsible for contemporary Catholic moral theology’s account of subjectivity. For example, many key themes in Catholic moral theology, such as prioritizing the contexts of cultural traditions and socio-political factors of moral decision-making, are the result of this turn.⁶⁶ The contemporary emphasis on conscience is also part of this

the binary, see Cloutier and Koerpel, “Beyond the Law-Conscience Binary,” 161–177.

⁶¹ Cloutier and Koerpel, “Beyond the Law-Conscience Binary,” 174; Robert J. Smith, “Conscience and Catholicism: The Nature and Function of Conscience,” in *Contemporary Catholic Moral Theology* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1998), 74.

⁶² *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 16, www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

⁶³ Cloutier and Koerpel, “Beyond the Law-Conscience Binary,” 174. For an overview of Häring’s theology, see Charles Curran, “Bernard Häring,” in *Diverse Voices in Modern US Moral Theology* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2018), 19–38. For more on *Gaudium et Spes*’s definition of conscience in the context of the Second Vatican Council, see the following: Charles Curran, “Strand Five: Second Vatican Council,” in *The Development of Moral Theology* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 224–252; Massimo Faggioli, “The Battle over *Gaudium et Spes* Then and Now,” in *A Council for the Global Church: Receiving Vatican II in History* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2015), 121–142.

⁶⁴ Cloutier and Koerpel, “Beyond the Law-Conscience Binary,” 174. See also Smith, “Conscience and Catholicism,” 74.

⁶⁵ Cloutier and Koerpel, “Beyond the Law-Conscience Binary,” 169.

⁶⁶ Cloutier and Koerpel, “Beyond the Law-Conscience Binary,” 175.

twentieth century inheritance. Cloutier and Koerpel understood the personalist turn's emphasis on conscience to be part of the post-conciliar movement away from pre-conciliar "juridical emphasis on ecclesial obedience to Church regulation."⁶⁷

As much as has been gained through this personalist turn, Cloutier and Koerpel express reservations with how this personalist turn has been carried into the twenty-first century—especially regarding contemporary understandings of conscience. In the twenty-first century, contemporary personalist theologies understand conscience to be the source of moral agency.⁶⁸ Cloutier and Koerpel questioned these theories by quoting Alasdair MacIntyre:

Within a personalist framework of conscience, how can one avoid the "self's self-serving presentation of itself to itself, a presentation designed to sustain an image of the self as well-ordered, free from fundamental conflict, troubled perhaps by occasional akratic difficulties, but for the most part entitled to approval both by itself and others"?⁶⁹

Do contemporary personalist theories of conscience escape this concern of reducing conscience to "self-serving presentation"? This hesitation calls into question the authenticity of the authority granted to conscience. As long as conscience is defined in a binary against the objectivist law as the subjective authority of morality, it is not clear how this concern can be escaped. If this concern cannot be alleviated, the entirety of the personalist framework falls into question.

One way to address Cloutier and Koerpel's concern is to employ what Coblenz terms narrative-phenomenological portraits. In the narratives of moral injury presented above, I considered conscience in various moments of moral injury. When considered together, these moments resulted in an understanding of conscience simultaneously personal and social. This can be verified in the interconnectivity of the personal and social dimensions of human life experienced in various moments of a moral injury. In view of these portraits, conscience is neither atomistic nor individualistic.

The understanding of conscience that emerges from studying experiences of moral injury resonates quite well with the definition in *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 16: conscience is "the most secret core and sanctuary of a man," where one "is alone with God, Whose voice

⁶⁷ Cloutier and Koerpel, "Beyond the Law-Conscience Binary," 174.

⁶⁸ Cloutier and Koerpel, "Beyond the Law-Conscience Binary," 174–175.

⁶⁹ Cloutier and Koerpel, "Beyond the Law-Conscience Binary," 176. Alasdair MacIntyre, "What Has Christianity to Say to the Moral Philosopher?," in *The Doctrine of God and Theological Ethics*, ed. Alan J. Torrance and Michael Banner (New York: T & T Clark, 2006), 22.

echoes in his depths.”⁷⁰ According to the Council, conscience is where the human person is alone with God and God summons the human person to do what is good and avoid evil. In this sense, conscience is very personal. At the same time, *Gaudium et Spes* does not neglect the social aspects of the human experience of conscience. According to *Gaudium et Spes*, conscience unites humanity in our common search for truth by making known the law God has written on human hearts.⁷¹ Therefore, while conscience is where the human person is alone with God, it is also where she is joined to others. Like the portraits of moral injury, *Gaudium et Spes* paints a picture of conscience that involves an interplay between these personal and social aspects of moral decision-making and action.

When Cloutier and Koerpel raised a concern about the understanding of conscience’s moral authority in the twenty-first century in terms of self-serving presentation, I understand them to be concerned about the lacking account of this interplay between the personal and social aspects of moral decision-making and action. When conscience is defined against law, it is difficult to maintain an account of conscience that does not isolate human persons and their moral judgments from each other. Put in the language of *Gaudium et Spes*, it is difficult for conscience as understood in the law-conscience binary to account for the way every human person is united in our common search for truth. Even though in today’s law-conscience binary the personal and social dimensions of moral decision-making and action lack coherence and integration, this connection is present in the personalist proposal of *Gaudium et Spes*.

The personalist emphasis of *Gaudium et Spes* does not detract from the respective social elements of moral decision-making and judgments. The absence of the social dimensions of conscience in today’s understanding of conscience “within the jurisdictional logic of the law-conscience binary” is a twenty-first century problem.⁷² The personalist turn is not uniquely responsible for the law-conscience binary. Rather, by reflecting on firsthand accounts of moral injury and its resonances with *Gaudium et Spes*’s definition of conscience, twenty-first century Catholic moral theology can be understood to have not yet fully developed a theology that completes this personalist turn. Catholic moral theology today suffers from an underdevelopment of the social dimension of conscience—a dimension so instrumental to *Gaudium et Spes*’s understanding of conscience. To think beyond the law-conscience binary, Catholic moral theology in the twenty-first century would do well to develop an understanding of practical

⁷⁰ *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 16.

⁷¹ *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 16.

⁷² Cloutier and Koerpel, “Beyond the Law-Conscience Binary,” 176.

reasoning and moral decision-making that accounts for this interplay of the personal and social aspects of conscience.

CONCLUSION

Coblentz's use of narrative and phenomenology in *Dust in the Blood* emerged from what she deemed as insufficient in theodical approaches' understanding of depressive suffering. In view of concerns and short-comings of today's definition of conscience, I have in view of Coblentz's success also employed narrative-phenomenological portraits to think beyond the law-conscience framework. Portraits of moral injury highlight the depth of interconnectivity between personal and social aspects of moral decision-making and judgments. This image is presupposed by the understanding of conscience proposed in *Gaudium et Spes*. While the law-conscience binary could be considered to be the result of the twentieth century's emphasis on conscience, I have proposed that the law-conscience binary is better understood as the result of an underdevelopment of this personalist turn and the respective definition of conscience proposed in *Gaudium et Spes*. By confronting the law-conscience binary with narrative and phenomenology, I have been able to propose **M** constructive way to make progress beyond intractable disagreements.

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