



Torture and Dignity: An Essay on Moral Injury

J. M. Bernstein

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In this unflinching look at the experience of suffering and one of its greatest manifestations—torture—J.M. Bernstein critiques the repressions of traditional moral theory, showing that our morals are not immutable ideals but fragile constructions that depend on our experience of suffering itself. Morals, Bernstein argues, not only guide our conduct but also express the depth of mutual dependence that we share as vulnerable and injurable individuals.

Beginning with the attempts to abolish torture in the eighteenth century, and then sensitively examining what is suffered in torture and related transgressions, such as rape, Bernstein elaborates a powerful new conception of moral injury. Crucially, he shows, moral injury always involves an injury to the status of an individual as a person—it is a violent assault against his or her dignity. Elaborating on this critical element of moral injury, he demonstrates that the mutual recognitions of trust form the invisible substance of our moral lives, that dignity is a fragile social possession, and that the perspective of ourselves as potential victims is an ineliminable feature of everyday moral experience.

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