

Moral Burnout

Abstract

A nurse in an understaffed hospital; an activist fighting insurmountable systemic injustice; an aid worker desperately triaging resources between victims of violence: individuals in morally demanding circumstances run a significant risk of burning out. Unnoticed by philosophers, an empirical literature on this phenomenon has explored a chronic stress condition: ‘Moral Burnout.’ Individuals with Moral Burnout become so preoccupied with their moral shortcomings that they lose the motivation to act on their moral judgments. This article introduces the phenomenon of Moral Burnout and shows it to be a potent counterexample to Judgment Internalism.

Malte Hendrickx
University of Michigan
435 State St., 48109 Michigan, Ann Arbor
hmalte@umich.edu

I Introduction

Casey is a nurse whose ward helps survivors of sexual assault. She takes pride in her work, finding it meaningful and morally important. Yet, sometimes, her attempts to protect survivors from future abuse fail. Sometimes, victims refuse to talk to authorities. Sometimes, there is insufficient evidence to pursue perpetrators. Sometimes, authorities stonewall. Casey’s thoughts are consumed by these failures. This constant flow of failure nags at her. Maybe another nudge, another word, another approach would have brought success? One morning, she finds herself in bed, dreading the mere thought of getting up and going to work. She knows that she is needed. She judges herself harshly for not going. Yet, in her burnt-out state, she finds herself wholly unmoved, shuddering at the mere thought of experiencing another failure.

Cases like Casey’s have been studied empirically. Following frequent moral failures, individuals lose the motivation to act upon their moral judgments. Moral Burnout poses serious questions about the nature of moral demands, moral agency, and moral motivation. It is, therefore, of significant philosophical interest. The first part of this paper sketches Moral Burnout to make it accessible for philosophers interested in the phenomenon.

The second part of the paper connects the phenomenon to a discussion about moral motivation. According to *judgment internalism about moral motivation*¹, moral judgments about the rightness or wrongness of actions necessarily motivate agents to act upon them. However, agents like Casey make genuine moral judgments without being motivated to act upon them. If agents like Casey exist, as this paper and the literature on which it rests suggest, then judgment internalism is wrong.

II Moral Burnout

To a first approximation, Moral Burnout occurs when individuals’ frequent moral failures lead to chronic stress, causing a loss of motivation.

¹ Henceforth: judgment internalism

The cause of moral burnout is stress. Generally, when agents are unable to act in the way they believe they are obligated to, they experience acute moral stress², i.e., mental or emotional strain arising from moral failure (Fumis et. al, 2017; Kopacz et al., 2019; Shoorideh et al., 2015). This by itself is not cause for concern. Healthy subjects display the same stress reaction to moral failure: it is a regular everyday phenomenon, and stress quickly recedes. Moral burnout ensues when such perceived failures become so frequent that moral stress does not recede and instead becomes chronic.

Moral Burnout has severe consequences. Patients typically report a total loss of motivation as a downstream effect of Moral Burnout. Severinsson (2008, p. 53) provides some self-reports:

“(I w)as lacking energy and motivation. I was always very enthusiastic . . . but in the end I felt I had given all that I could give and I couldn’t give anymore. (...) I was burnt out, I knew that.”

In analyzing self-reports, Severinsson (2003, p. 60) identifies a common cause as

"high demands, a low level of control and feelings of powerlessness, (...) giving rise to feelings of not being able to fulfill one's moral obligations."

Consequently,

"The exposure to suffering and being a witness to suffering is agonizing ... one can no longer cope with all the ethical problems encountered."

Typically, this forms a vicious cycle: a failure to successfully act on moral judgments leads to moral stress. When too frequent, moral stress becomes chronic: Moral Burnout. Moral Burnout and the associated loss of motivation reduce the ability to meet moral demands - thereby increasing the perceived gap between moral judgment and one's actions even further. This cycle typically persists until agents decide to abandon the stressful circumstance (e.g., quit their job) or change their outlook on what constitutes moral failure. Interestingly, agents seem able to function in non-moral aspects of their lives, such as when searching for alternative jobs, indicating that the motivational problem is specific to the morally demanding job.

The problem of Moral Burnout is considerable both in scope and significance. A meta-analysis by Karakachian and Koelbig (2019) laments that the prevalence of Moral Burnout is skyrocketing. In a widely read opinion piece, Kopacz, Ames, and Koenig (2019) call for an open discussion of Moral Burnout in research and medical communities to reverse this worrying trend.

I have sketched the phenomenon of Moral Burnout, in which agents harshly judge their moral failures, inducing chronic stress and consequently losing moral motivation. I hope it is apparent to the reader that Moral Burnout is philosophically interesting. To illustrate one case where studying Moral Burnout is philosophically interesting, I will now turn to a discussion about moral motivation. I will argue that Moral Burnout provides us with a potent counterexample to judgment internalism, a popular metaethical position that posits a necessary connection between moral judgments and motivation.

III Internalism and Psychopaths

² Chronic stress disorders like burnout are not to be confused with acute stress disorders like PTSD or moral injury. An interested reader can consult Sun's (forthcoming) analysis of practical death for a philosophical exploration of the psychological consequences of severe one-time moral failures.

Do moral judgments motivate necessarily or just contingently? Judgment internalists argue that one cannot make a sincere moral judgment without thereby being motivated to act on it. We can follow Asarnow and Taylor (2022) in defining the core thesis:

Judgment Internalism: Necessarily, if A judges that A is morally required to ϕ (or ought to ϕ , etc.), then A is motivated to ϕ .

Judgment Internalism is a sweeping thesis, but it explains a pervasive everyday phenomenon. When we judge something to be morally wrong, this judgment usually has some motivational force. This explains how moral judgments differ from, for example, judging that a tree has leaves: the former, but not the latter, has a distinctly practical component. Judgment Internalism captures this practical component of moral judgment by taking motivation to be a necessary component of what it is to make a moral judgment.

At face value, Moral Burnout is at odds with judgment internalism. This is because Moral Burnout is characterized by both harsh moral self-judgment for one's failure to act morally and a total loss of motivation to act upon these judgments. If self-report and clinical analysis of these cases can be trusted, Moral Burnout is a counterexample to judgment internalism, because it shows us instances of moral judgment without accompanying motivation.

Moral Burnout is not the first counterexample to be raised against judgment internalism. Psychopathy (Nichols, 2022) and depression (Mele, 1996) have been raised as possible cases of 'amoralism', i.e. agents that morally judge without being motivated to act upon their judgments. Yet these counterexamples face problems: psychopathy and sociopathy undermine the capacity to make moral judgments, and depression undermines general motivational capacities.

Moral Burnout, as I will now argue, presents a more potent counterexample because it neither undermines the capacity for moral judgment nor general motivational capacities.

What distinguishes the counterexample from Moral Burnout from, e.g., someone with depression? A depressed individual makes moral judgments without being motivated to act on them. But depression is not characterized by a lack of *moral* motivation, but rather a general lack of motivation. Depression involves a significant blunting of reward signals as well as a lack of faith in one's ability to affect outcomes. Both of these are key factors in the expected value of control, which determines whether effort is invested in a task (redacted). Because of this, depression can be understood as a malfunction of the motivational system, affecting all aspects of life. Judgment Internalists can thus claim that depression is a fair exception that does not threaten the general principle: if one's motivational faculties are malfunctioning, so will moral judgments (Smith, 1994).

The same is not true for Moral Burnout. Individuals with Moral Burnout report a loss of motivation, for the job in which they experience moral failure, but retain motivation to, for example, switch jobs or engage with other areas of life. This indicates no general malfunction of motivational faculties. Indeed, I do not believe Moral Burnout is well-described as a malfunction. Individuals with Moral Burnout find themselves in unsustainable circumstances in which they cannot uphold their moral principles. Constant stress is unhealthy and maladaptive. Disengaging from circumstances that give rise to constant stress, a typical consequence of Moral Burnout, is beneficial for the individual affected.

Are psychopaths better counterexamples to Judgment Internalism? No, because they cannot make genuine moral judgments. While they may be able to report what actions are considered immoral, they do not *judge* them to be immoral (Hare, 1952). Compare: an atheist can identify and report the Shroud of Turin as a sacred object. But whereas a Catholic judges this object to be sacred, atheists do not. They have

merely picked up on the judgment of Catholics and are able to report it. Ethicists speak of judgments in the “inverted comma” sense (McNaughton, 1988). The central thought is that psychopaths can correctly classify which actions are “right” or “wrong” without judging them to be right or wrong in any meaningful way by having observed the judgments of others.

With very few exceptions, psychopaths are studied in prison populations. Psychopaths are not stupid: like others, they will have been able to learn that murdering is widely considered wrong. When being interviewed by psychologists, it is easy to imagine how one would voice agreement with such moral judgments even if one disagreed, maybe in the hope of leaving a good impression for future hearings. Indeed, it is sometimes found that when prompted by researchers, psychopaths report many conventional norms (e.g. politeness norms) as moral norms (e.g. don’t kill), presumably to strike the interviewers as especially diligent in moral matters (Blair, 1995; contested by Aharoni et al., 2011). This is further evidence for an inability to make genuine moral judgments. If psychopaths are incapable of genuine moral judgment, they are not counterexamples to Judgment Internalism.

This is different from cases of Moral Burnout, because it is essential to Moral Burnout that the agent retains their capacity for moral judgment.

At its heart, Moral Burnout is a chronic stress condition that arises from one’s obsession with one’s moral shortcomings. The agent with Moral Burnout perceives themselves as failing so frequently and gravely at what they ought to do that the stress from their failure rarely fades. A common aspect of the condition is the constant feelings of shame and guilt, a stark contrast to psychopaths, who famously show a lack of remorse for their moral failures. This is because the agent with Moral Burnout retains their capacity for moral judgment, whereas the psychopath lacks the capacity.

Indeed, the agent with Moral Burnout not only retains their capacity for moral judgment but also uses it constantly.³ It is precisely because they judge their behaviour to be morally wrong that they find themselves in a state of chronic moral stress. If they no longer made moral judgments, this stress would recede, and they’d no longer be experiencing Moral Burnout.

This is important because it shows that exercising the capacity for moral judgment is essential to Moral Burnout. We have seen the vicious cycle that is so common for those with Moral Burnout: moral judgments give rise to the possibility of moral failure; moral failure leads to moral stress; moral stress becomes chronic; chronic moral stress raises the probability of future moral failure. Moral judgments are not an optional component of Moral Burnout - rather, judging oneself to have morally failed is essential to both the phenomenon and the experience of Moral Burnout.

Moral judgment is essential to Moral Burnout but not to other conditions like psychopathy or sociopathy. It is for this reason that Moral Burnout presents a much more potent example of the amoralist. We know for certain that the agent with Moral Burnout has retained the capacity for moral judgment because they could not experience their condition if they had lost said capacity.

Agents with Moral Burnout clearly morally judge their own actions harshly yet have lost moral motivation. They are thus a potent counterexample to judgment internalism.

IV Responses: Irrationality, Impossibility

³ Sometimes to the point of obsession: c.f. Glasser & Irving, 2026 for the connection on obsession and one’s cares.

How could judgment internalists reply to the challenge from Moral Burnout?⁴ For one, they could claim that individuals with Moral Burnout are motivated by their judgments. This contradicts self-report and clinical analysis of these cases. It takes only one case of total loss of motivation to show that Moral Burnout is a counterexample to judgment internalism. So showing self-report and clinical analysis to be wrong would require serious engagement with the literature on Moral Burnout.

One could adjust the internalist claim in response. For example, recent formulations posit that making the judgment that one ought to ϕ necessarily entails intending to ϕ and thus being motivated to ϕ , *provided the agent is rational* (Broome, 2013; Kieseewetter, 2017). On such views, Moral Burnout might not be a counterexample to internalism, but rather just an instance of irrationality.

However, there are reasons to believe that Moral Burnout is not an instance of irrationality. In this, it differs from depression, psychopathy or sociopathy: disorders that are commonly taken to be malfunctions that lead to a misrepresentation about agents and the world they inhabit. Individuals with Moral Burnout typically find themselves in unsustainable moral pursuits: the standard they hold themselves to, or the circumstances in which they find themselves, are so harsh as to make frequent failure inevitable. There is nothing irrational about being stressed about failing to provide adequate care in an understaffed hospital. Imagine you find your friend in constant moral stress after recent budget cuts at her hospital. What advice would you give her on how to overcome her struggles?

Presumably, you'd sit down for a serious talk about how unsustainable the situation is. Can your friend switch employers? Careers? And, if this is not possible, could they at least try to stop holding themselves to such unrealistic standards? Presumably, the rational response to Moral Burnout is to disengage from the challenging circumstances or to temper the stern moral judgments that jointly make for the excessive moral stress. But this is what we typically see in cases of Moral Burnout: agents, no longer motivated to act on their moral judgments, switch careers to escape the circumstances that make their ethical pursuit unsustainable.

It seems fruitful to think of Moral Burnout as a signal. Chronic stress from moral failures signals to the agent that their current circumstances are untenable and that a change is needed. Thankfully, agents often find themselves able to make such changes: insofar as they do, I take them to act rationally given the situation they find themselves in.

Here's a related worry: maybe the actions of the individuals in question are rational, but their judgments are not. After all, it sounds like these agents judge themselves harshly for their perceived inability to comply with a norm. But if they cannot perform what they are required to do, how can it be that they ought to do it?

It does seem that many agents with Moral Burnout have lost faith in the efficacy of their actions: might they *perceive* themselves to be unable to perform what needs to be done, yet still morally judge themselves to ought to do it? If so, the scope of Moral Burnout may be wider than initially believed – Moral Burnout would pose a challenge to the widely endorsed Ought-Implies-Can principle.

In response, an internalist may qualify their position by saying that only judgments which agents believe are in their power to enact are ones that necessarily motivate.

But not all cases of Moral Burnout are ones where the morally required action is impossible. In fact, the effort and difficulty are gradual phenomena that are highly context-sensitive (Hendrickx, forthcoming). A

⁴ I thank an anonymous reviewer for very helpful suggestions that inspired this section.

person with Moral Burnout might resume work for one day if paid one million dollars in compensation, or if threatened with the death of a loved one if they fail to appear. If at least some such cases exist, the counterexample to the internalist would remain potent.

IV Conclusion

I argued that Moral Burnout can serve as a potent counterexample to judgment internalism. As these things go, I do not believe Moral Burnout is the end-all of judgment internalism. One may doubt the self-report of the individuals in question and hope that a modicum of motivation remains despite their denials of feeling said motivation. As always, more research is needed. I hope that some of this further research will be philosophical in nature. Moral Burnout is a fascinating and terrifying phenomenon affecting ethically ambitious individuals. Philosophers should not ignore their predicament.⁵

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