Chapter 5

The numbing of the moral competence of soldiers

Having looked at the work arenas of soldiers and the implications of its different dimensions on their behaviour within these arenas, it is now time to discuss the issue of numbing within what could be categorized as a fourth dimension: the moral one. This moral numbing, I argue, can be seen as the end product of the different processes of numbing discussed above. By moral numbing I mean the numbing of the ability to recognize and act upon a moral aspect of a certain situation. The ability to do this has been called moral professionalism (Verweij 2007). After introducing this concept in order to understand the issue of moral numbing better, two central issues relating to moral numbing are discussed: cognitive blurring and detachment.

5.1 Moral professionalism

‘The thing that I managed to understand only later, honestly because that place makes you emotionally detached and you aren’t really able to figure out what goes on there ... I understood how inhumane it was. How evil it is to do this to people. To take them and stick them on top of each other; to make them stand like this for twenty minutes, and not because of some security necessity, but because the soldiers acted out of inertia and found an interesting way to pass their guard duty.’ (BS Hebron)

An acknowledgement rings out in this quote as the soldier conveys how he only came to understand later what he and his comrades did when they were serving in the military. This shows the detachment of the soldiers from acknowledging what is right and wrong or from knowing how human beings should be treated at the time of serving. An important notion here is moral professionalism which can be defined as being morally competent or as recognizing the moral dimension of a situation and being able to make the morally responsible decisions at the right time within a work arena (Verweij 2007). In the above example, this professionalism was clearly not present.

Professionalism, on a moral level, means doing one’s job according to values and norms that come from one’s society, one’s upbringing and one’s professional training. Militaries try to ensure that their soldiers are morally professional so that they will know how to act in a morally
responsible way in each situation that they encounter. For this purpose, militaries make an effort
to train their soldiers accordingly. As mentioned earlier, Richardson et al. (2004) have used the
term ‘moral fitness' to emphasize this learnable aspect of moral awareness.

What happens, however, when the circumstances are not ideal or clear-cut? When
numerous factors influence the behaviour of soldiers in ways they could hardly have been trained
for? The work of Israeli soldiers is, indeed, work that is often unpredictable and many morally
unclear factors are involved, especially when dealing with civilians. Together with all the
implications discussed in the previous chapters, Israeli soldiers often find themselves in morally
ambiguous situations. Here I will go into some of the moral implications of the work arenas
described in Chapter 3 for Israeli soldiers. We could, then, call these moral implications and the
numbing of the moral competency of soldiers the end result of the emotional, physical and
cognitive processes discussed in Chapter 4.

‘You just become like a robot, I don't know how to explain it. There's a stage
where… either routine or fatigue when you no longer have the strength to be patient,
you have no strength to… Someone comes and throws a remark which he shouldn't
like, “What do you want from me?” which is legitimate in his opinion, and even in
my opinion, that person lives there, you know, it not… It's a street where they're
allowed to pass, and a soldier comes and stops him and checks him and searches him
and his kids are there and his family is there, and its humiliating for him, and there's a
stage when you just don't care anymore, old man, not old man, you check them all.’
( BS Hebron)

The soldier in the above example clearly did not recognize the moral dimension of the
situation he was in. He explains this in terms of routine and fatigue. He did not care anymore and
just did his work without considering the context in which the situation took place, of who he
was checking and of why he was checking this person.

Eviatar, who chose a professional career in the IDF as a company commander after
finishing his compulsory duty, can give a good ‘view from above’ of the experiences soldiers go
through and how their moral professionalism is tested by hardship:

‘I wouldn’t use the word boredom, but attrition [shkhiba] that’s the word, if you get
tired mentally and physically your ability to fight this war [against attrition] is much
smaller. As I said before, I, in this Intifada, didn’t stand eight hours at a checkpoint.
But who did, I refuse to use the word boredom, I use shkhika, it’s a situation that to stay normal you have to be constantly at war, to stay in your place is to run. You have to fight with yourself not to do it. The easiest way is to go with the flow [lehishef], when there is a person at the checkpoint everyday that can’t go in and you tell him again and again, he comes and you tell him to stand at the side and he doesn’t do that at the third time after you didn’t sleep for three nights… to stay sane you have to fight the whole time, the natural way is to be swept into behaviour that is less humane.’ (5)

Eviatar points out a very crucial point – the ability of attrition and the emotions of soldiers to affect the actual behaviour of soldiers. In his eyes the real war the soldiers are fighting is within themselves; the struggle to fight the effect of the routine, to fight becoming numb and indifferent. In his words it is, thus, much harder to behave morally and stay ‘sane’ than to behave ‘less humanely’, something even he depicts as ‘natural’ behaviour. The following quote describes how another commander realizes that he has ‘lost’ his sanity and how difficult this ‘fight’ against losing it is:

‘The minute I saw him [a Palestinian youth who had run away from him several times] I burst at him overwhelmed with rage and hatred I had never experienced before in my life. I grabbed him by the neck, and choked him as I pushed him a few metres towards the pavement, where I bound his hands and feet hard with plastic cuffs until his skin bled, and detained him. All this time the soldiers at the checkpoint were watching - these same soldiers I commanded for over eight months, with whom I served all that time in the Territories, trying to explain how wrong it was to use violence against the Palestinian population, with whom I argued for hours on how immoral it is to puncture car tires, to whom I tried to give a personal example on how important it is to give water to Palestinians who were held at checkpoints on a hot day. All that teaching and personal example went down the drain at this small instant in which I lost my sanity … This incident made me understand that if such outburst could happen to me - a commander who tried to persuade a whole platoon (soldiers and commanders) how immoral such violent behaviour is - such outbursts must and will have to occur to countless soldiers serving in the territories in those tough, frustrating, and impossible situations. Indeed I have encountered many cases in which my soldiers and my junior officers
behaved abominably towards the Palestinian population. After that incident, when I encountered such a case, I could better understand what the soldiers went through, and how impossible it is to stay sane in these places, and how I hope my sons will not be in the same places, and will not have to fight themselves in order to stay sane.’

(Boas Maltreatment)

Thus the struggle against attrition is a very hard one and is not won by many soldiers. Even this commander who viewed himself as very moral, very patient and empathetic to the suffering of the Palestinian population that he and his soldiers dealt with, found himself in a situation of rage and aggression that was very much unlike him.

The explanation the commander gives relates to the ‘tough, frustrating, and impossible situations’ soldiers face in the Territories. These situations all involve a certain amount of emotional and physical attrition which has a profound effect on the moral reasoning of soldiers and, consequently, on their moral professionalism. Verweij takes this into consideration when she speaks about the aspect of resilience that should be part of morally professional conduct. This resilience should accommodate the soldier’s difficult and conflicting emotions, but also make it possible for him to give these emotions a place without turning to violent acts (Verweij 2008: 17). Guy, however, shows understanding for the aggressive behaviour of his soldiers in such circumstances, even though he does not condone it:

‘That is one of the reasons that these incidents occurred that were in the grey zone, its shkhika, attrition [shkhika] in the military is … they’re children in the end, there are no games, children have a certain line till where they can go, so yes, after they haven’t seen their girlfriend for more than 3 weeks, I suppose that they can’t always control themselves when an Arab worker or child, especially if it’s a Arab youth of 18 that says a wrong word, it could be that he will give him a slap in the face.’ (29)

Yossi relates how some of his soldiers ‘lost it’ during Operation Defensive Shield:

‘There were a lot that broke down, I had a soldier that I think on the last night, 2 o’clock in the night, we were guarding, and suddenly he decides he shoots for no reason, and he took apart a house with bullets. There were a lot of falls of tension, we needed to deal with… and take people out of the fighting, that couldn’t, couldn’t, enough. Because of the tension, fear, pressure, suddenly he sees that death is really
In short, there are many aspects of the work of Israeli soldiers in the OPT that influence soldiers while behaving in a morally professional manner means that they can combat these influences. Their ability to recognize moral situations and to deal with them in a morally proper way is always being tested time and again. Verweij’s concept of resilience is important to take into consideration here as it makes clear that behaving in a morally professional way means not only knowing what a moral situation is and combating the external aspects of the difficult work one has to perform, but also being able to deal with moral dilemmas and the emotional difficulties these involve while giving these emotions a place. As the examples above showed, this is often not the case with Israeli soldiers in the OPT. Soldiers can ‘lose it’ and sometimes conduct themselves in a violent or harassing manner.

### 5.2 Cognitive blurring

This numbed moral competency or flawed moral professionalism is accompanied by something I would like to call a state of cognitive blurring. As we have already seen in many quotes from soldiers, the boredom, the cold, the heat, the fear and the power they have all have a profound effect on their behaviour towards the Palestinian civilian population they come into contact with at the checkpoints or during arrests.

Cognitive blurring can be defined as the failure to grasp a meaning or experience cognitively. One does not recognize what is in front of one’s eyes as of a certain significance that should be acted upon. When speaking about morality this means that a situation or problem is not recognized as containing a moral dilemma. One fails to see the moral importance because one’s moral framework is not triggered (see van Baarda and Verweij 2006: 14). Such a state we could also call a ‘moral slumber’ (Grossmann 1988: 147) or a state of moral fatigue (Cohen 2001: 192).

The state of cognitive blurring is characterized by a high degree of indifference that is connected to the physical, mental and cognitive numbing discussed above. Soldiers seem not to care about what happens around them, they are indifferent to the suffering of the Palestinians or to the way they are treated. Dar et al. already recognized this state during the first Intifada when during their study ‘several respondents reported a blunting of the emotions and indifference, sometimes extending to lack of perception of the surroundings’ (2000: 299).
The following two testimonies of soldiers from an elite paratrooper unit show the ambivalent feelings of the two and the process they went through from having difficulties with the activities of arresting to becoming indifferent to it:

‘In short, the arrests, in the end you become indifferent, in the beginning it was very hard for me, you come to arrest someone, there is some kind of indication [intelligence information], if there isn’t any indication, what can you do, you do this disgusting job and you wake up in the morning and forget about the contact with the population.’ (BS 58-59, translation EG)

‘all these arrests, very fast you become indifferent to them. The first time you do an arrest you suddenly see this little kid that’s afraid of you and you say “what, I’m not a scary person”, this broke me up, it changed the way I looked at things, you suddenly understand how others see you and this really got to me, but when you have already done a few arrests, you become indifferent to this feeling … the whole idea is to go home as quickly as possible. From that point of view you get indifferent.’ (BS 58-59, translation EG)

Failing to recognize the situation in front of you as morally problematic and failing to feel empathy for the suffering of others can easily lead to aggressive and immoral behaviour toward people or their possessions. Being in a situation where one is worn out (tired, bored, tense, hot or cold) can have a profound effect on the conduct of soldiers, as the following quote shows:

‘In the beginning you treat them with more respect, with time you wear out. You start to bother them more…’ (Q: ‘Where does this come from?’) ‘From the boredom, if you’re at the checkpoint everyday …there is nothing you can do. You can be the most humane person around … there is a lot of boredom, you hold this grudge, you have to be here for the settlers you don’t want to be there … so you take it out on them [the Palestinians]. On whom can you take it out? Not hitting or so, but you tell them “open the trunk”, open this, what do you have here, what do you have there? Also if it’s not needed, it’s your “thing” … like you’re at the checkpoint and you have to sit out the time somehow, you have talked to every one of the guys, so you go to them [the Palestinians]. You have these stories, I understand where it’s
coming from. That there really is harassment. I understand exactly where it comes from. I don’t accept it but I understand it.’ (13)

How easily a situation at a checkpoint can turn into the harassment of innocents, we can make out from Snir’s words:

‘It can be that other people would take the two people that were making problems, put them aside, blindfold them, put handcuffs, and put them in the sun, so they’ll learn. No wonder there are people that do that … Why? Because you haven’t been home for 2 weeks, you do eight-eight at the checkpoint, you are hot, you are thirsty, and it’s the easiest. Everyone makes his own decision.’ (11)

Yoel remembers a period when he and his soldiers were stationed in the heat of the Gaza Strip, locked up in small military armoured vehicles:

‘Listen, one of the games, it’s bad, but after a week you are in a puma [military armoured vehicle] in Gaza, and I didn’t do it, but my soldiers did, you are a week in a puma, you’re not allowed to do anything, everyone is on top of each other, in a puma there are supposed to be maximum seven/eight people, we were with thirteen people in a puma. Everyone shits in their helmets, its really, really hot, you can’t open the sides because they shoot at you all the time, we were there let’s say three-four days, and at a certain moment, there is a MAG [automatic weapon] that you can shoot with from within, you don’t go outside, so they would play with taking down solar heaters.’65 (20)

In this last example, soldiers are cramped together in small vehicles for days on end with nothing to do but wait. Their commander claims to understand why they ‘take it out’ on the water containers of the Palestinians living in the surrounding area. Both soldiers and their commander seem oblivious to the suffering they bring to other people with their random acts of shooting, though, a clear example of their blurred view of the reality around them.

65 On the roofs of Palestinian houses big black containers can be found in which water is warmed by the sun; these are at times shot at by soldiers.
5.3 Detachment: ‘not thinking about it’

Another issue concerning the moral behaviour of soldiers is the issue of detachment. This distancing from one’s experiences will be explored through some concepts used by soldiers when explaining their experiences. A recurring theme in the discourse of Israeli soldiers is that of ‘no time to think’ or ‘not thinking about it’. Such utterances are often connected to the description of situations where there was literally no time to think one’s activities over. During arrest operations, but also in the time between activities, everything has to happen as quickly as possible. Many soldiers indicated that because of the little resting time they had, there was not any time left to think things over or to think about what they had done just a few hours before.

The fact that soldiers seem to have no time to think about the actions and operations they participate in has an effect on their moral behaviour. When there is no time to think, there is certainly no time to deliberate about one’s actions or to take the time to internalize the situation at hand and think about the meaning of one’s actions. To illustrate this I will give a few examples.

Oren tells about the time he and his comrades were sent into the Territories as new recruits when the second Intifada had just broken out. In what he says, a lack of direction in the military activities becomes clear. In the chaos of those first days of the Intifada, no one knew exactly what was going on, the soldiers just seemed to follow their commanders without understanding what was happening around them.

‘In the beginning, we didn’t think, they didn’t understand still what was happening. I don’t remember thinking about it, there wasn’t time to think. All in all it was quite stressful; no one knew that it would last for so long. They didn’t prepare for it. In the beginning it was a chaos, they took us from the base suddenly to Gilo [neighbourhood of Jerusalem that was heavily attacked in the beginning of the Al-Aqsa Intifada], there were rumours but no one knew what was happening.’ (3)

‘In principle a simple soldier isn’t supposed to take responsibility on himself. The commander has more experience, more authority.’ (Q: ‘Did the soldiers know/ask what and why things were happening?’) ‘There is no time to think, I don’t remember that I thought about it, you don’t get to go home for a month, we have to run from place to place, there are problems. Maybe after a few months you start to think what did we do and why.’ (3)
Rami, a soldier in the Nahal Brigade, also recalls not thinking about his activities at the moment he carried them out. Here he talks about searches in Palestinian houses:

‘If I would have thought about it then, then personally I wouldn’t have broken stuff. But if it was someone that was known to be a suspect we would break things.’ (Q: ‘Did you get the order to break things?’) ‘First of all we wouldn’t break things on purpose, but if something didn’t open we would break it open. What can you do?’

The last example is from Doron, a soldier from an elite unit in the Nahal Brigade who was very reflective about his military duty which had, in fact, just ended when he was interviewed. Here he puts into words the reasons he believes cause soldiers to become ‘animals’ that do not think but just do:

‘It turned me, the military, in many instances into an animal, a stupid one, that doesn’t think, the whole issue with the Palestinians, the contact with them, the friction with them, sometimes you do think, because they trained you like that, you don’t use your head to see if it’s logical or illogical, because if a person with a head on his shoulders would think about all kinds of things during his service, a lot of things would have looked different … it’s bad that there is no thinking, that there is no space for it, and you do turn into a kind of animal.’ (Q: ‘How does this show?’) ‘In the operations that you do, the way you speak to people, you speak in a very bad manner to people that are older than you.’

The last two quotations, especially, point to the fact that not thinking about one’s actions can easily result in misconduct by soldiers. Activities are done in a rush and, as a result, no time is taken to look at the situation, to assess it and to act in a morally professional way.

However, besides it being an actual issue of time, there also seems to be a conscious effort by soldiers not to think about their activities, their feelings and their surroundings too much. When they are ‘there’, inside the Territories, within their military space, they prefer not to think about what they are doing because realizing exactly what their actions are and what consequences they might have could make it very difficult for soldiers to carry out those activities.
An expression used when speaking about this ‘non-thinking’ mode soldiers get into is ‘rosh katan’ (small head).\footnote{See Ben-Ari 1998 where he discusses the metaphor of the brain used by military personnel when speaking about a unit or Brigade.} The expression points to the deliberate avoidance of getting too deep into what is happening around you or of using your ability to deliberate. A soldier that has a ‘rosh katan’ does not ask too much about what he is doing and does only what he is told without being interested in the bigger picture of his actions and, thus, without taking any real responsibility for them.

This mechanism of detachment helps soldiers to carry out their work without letting their emotions or rational thoughts get in the way. A soldier who, for example, has to enter a Palestinian house at night will have an easier task if he does not think too much about the inhabitants, about the impact of his actions on them or about his own fear. Such coping mechanisms will be discussed in more detail in the next part of the study.

The impression one gets is that the military itself is also interested in soldiers keeping a low profile, following the orders they get without asking questions about the reasons behind these orders. Soldiers who think about their activities and who form their own opinions on what should or should not be done can cause operational difficulties as they will be less inclined to just follow the orders they receive. Keeping soldiers ‘dumb’ or at least not having them think too much thus safeguards military operational effectiveness. Commanders, however, are expected to ‘leagil rosh’, to open their minds, look around them, ask questions and try to understand the context of their activities and orders.

Haggai sees benefits for the soldier himself in not thinking about his actions too much. In his words it saves the soldier from uncertain situations and difficult decision-making:

‘Yes is yes, no is no. It’s black and white, it’s the military, the only one who can think is the commander, or the platoon commander, doesn’t matter, the one who is leading, he is the only one who can think beyond, soldiers only have yes or no, they don’t get space to think. And that actually prevents the entire “if” and all the “maybe”. It secures us in that way.’ (8)

Doron, however, sees some difficulties with not knowing or reflecting upon the situation at hand. By behaving like this, soldiers do not take any responsibility upon themselves and do not show any interest in the situation they are in or in the activities they carry out:
'That’s how a soldier looks like, when he’s just a soldier, he doesn’t have any responsibility, he doesn’t demand some responsibility, there are those who say great, who don’t want that, they don’t want, but there are also soldiers that don’t show any interest, they do what they are told and that’s it. It ends; no one talks to them until they are going to do something else.’ (23)

To have a ‘rosh katan’ or ‘small head’ and to refrain from thinking about one’s activities can easily lead to detachment from the situation one is in and to a failure to see the gravity of one’s acts or the moral problem at hand.

Zadok puts in words how the situation changes when one becomes a commander. With the responsibility that a commander has, his mind ‘opens up’ and he starts to reflect on his activities, thus being able to make the moral distinction between right and wrong:

‘As a soldier I was with my head against the wall. What I saw everyone do, I did. As a commander you understand more, as a soldier you say, you see the commander do like that, then I’ll also do it. Don’t think too much, rosh katan. That’s the purpose of the military. When you’re a commander, when you have responsibility, you start looking more, at the different directions, what can happen if this, then you already start to think differently, and see that what you do is not right. But you can’t say I’m sorry, you can’t say excuse me, you did it, that’s it.’ (26)

To act in a morally responsible way and to be morally competent or morally professional, one needs to think. A person will have to think about the situation he finds himself in, view it within its context and decide on the best way to act. ‘Not thinking’ increases the chances of misbehaviour by soldiers and does not give them the opportunity to reflect on their actions. The soldiers fail to recognize what they see in front of them or to see their own actions as morally problematic; their moral framework is not triggered. In her analysis of Hannah Arendt’s work, Verweij points to this issue and writes: ‘responsibility and accountability are the manifestation of the ability to think, i.e. of the ability to conduct this inner dialogue, an ability that can be developed by everybody’ (2002b: 156).

One of the soldiers quoted above even goes as far as to say that a soldier can become a ‘sort of animal’ from this lack of thinking, an animal that just acts without giving these acts a thought. Other metaphors about soldiers becoming robots were also used, pointing to the prevalence of acting without thinking.
In retrospect

In the last quote, the soldier in question talks about looking back in retrospect and understanding how certain things he had done were not right. In his experience this was related to becoming a commander and, as such, becoming more centrally involved in the activities of his unit and the military as a whole. Other soldiers have declared that after being released from the military for a while, the distance in time and often also space (young Israelis flock abroad in large numbers after their release from the military)\(^{67}\) allows them to look back and understand more deeply what their activities entailed, how many risks they took and what the impact of their actions was on the people involved.

In relation to the reinforcing of a curfew, Golan, for example, talks about how he would explain his actions to Palestinians. Believing at first that they just did not understand how the military system worked, he then comes to an understanding that he, at the time, was the one who did not understand what was really going on. The people he stopped just wanted to go to work without feeling the need or wanting to understand the Israeli military system:

‘We tell them, we are here, I don’t like taking the air out of your tyres but I do this so you will tell your cousin, that’s how we talk to them, for sure. And they say “yes, yes”. Then I thought well they don’t understand, they don’t see the institutional view, now I see, goddamn, the guy wants to go to work, I didn’t understand.’ (7)

Assaf is another soldier who looks back now and realizes that he did not understand the real impact of his actions as a soldier. In his enthusiasm to be a good soldier he forgot to look at the person in front of him and to see this person in context, to understand, for example, that having a beard could be out of grief and not because he was an extremist:

‘Where is the respect, and if he looks suspicious and I would put him on the side in front of all his children and I would check with that device or I would have someone else check him and stand in front of him with a weapon just because he grew a beard because his father just died. And I think he is suspicious and he didn’t have water to wash so he is dirty … but these are things I know now because I matured and saw other things. Then … you’re like “catch terrorists, respect”, that here there won’t be [a terror attack].’ (9)

\(^{67}\) See the documentary ‘Flipping Out’ by Yoav Shamir about the problematic issue of drug-use during such trips.
Sitting besides the pool in a quiet kibbutz, Doron talks about how he cannot understand how he did the things he did as a soldier. Today, after thinking and realizing how many risks he took, he says he would ‘die of fear’ if he had to do it again:

‘No, in the Territories they release you, it’s amazing, the thought, suddenly I say, when I was sitting with my friends in the kibbutz and I say if now I was going to run with a weapon over there in a refugee camp, I would die of fear. And then I did it all the time, and in the military they also teach you not to think, whatever they tell you, you do. Doesn’t interest you … whenever they tell you “go” [kadima], execute. But now, you’re in civilian life, you know what you have to lose, and what you leave behind. It’s much more difficult.’ (23)

The fact that after the releasing of soldiers from their service many realize their actions could have been more considerate and less harsh emphasizes the influence their detachment from the situation they were in had on their actual behaviour as soldiers. Not thinking about one’s actions because of lack of time or because of conscious distancing enhances the state of moral numbing soldiers find themselves in.

5.4 Conclusion
In the above quotes soldiers voice their understanding of the behaviour of their comrades. It is clear to them that when you find yourself in such a situation of stress, work overload and attrition, you will do things that you should not. The mental and physical numbing that has been described in the previous chapters, the numbing of the soldiers’ moral competence and the cognitive blurring and detachment it can lead to influence the way soldiers see the ‘other’ and, in particular, treat the ‘other’. The power bestowed on them, furthermore, gives them the opportunity to act upon their state of numbness carrying out senseless acts such as shooting at solar heaters or shouting at Palestinians for no good reason.

The processes of numbing that take place on the different dimensions that were discussed in Chapter 4, the emotional, physical and the cognitive, were shown to lead to a state of numbing in the moral dimension: indifference and apathy take over as the principal attitudes of the soldiers. This numbing was linked to the issue of cognitive blurring; the circumstances around the soldiers did not trigger their moral frameworks anymore. Soldiers’ detachment from their surroundings was, then, discussed – the conscious and unconscious effort made not to think or internalize what goes on around them.
These processes all contribute to behaviour that can be aggressive, humiliating or even violent towards the ‘other’, in this case the Palestinian civilians. It, thus, has an important impact on their moral decision-making, on whether they recognize moral dilemmas as such and, if they do, on the way they deal with them.

In Part 3 of this study I will deal with the moral strategies soldiers use in their discourse. I will discuss several mechanisms and explanations used by soldiers when speaking about their activities and their decision-making. Furthermore, the issue of instrumental morality, as used by soldiers, will be discussed.