

# *Stoic Warriors: The Ancient Philosophy behind the Military Mind*

by Nancy Sherman, Oxford University Press, 2005, 242 pp.

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A quick glance at the website promoting Nancy Sherman's *Stoic Warriors* indicates an impressive list of television and radio interviews as well as dozens of talks at both military and academic venues that for most academic philosophers are the stuff of dreams. [1] With many reviews appearing in scholarly and popular journals and kudos adorning her book from people as diverse as therapist and employee of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Jonathan Shay, former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, and former U.S. National Security Advisor Anthony Lake, one might think that Sherman has struck a chord with a wide audience. However, despite the high-profile publicity and the timeliness of the book's publication, its reception has been rather mixed and occasionally hostile. One would have expected a warmer reception both from military personnel who are being taken seriously and treated respectfully by an academic and from academics who tend to endorse Sherman's Walzerian views concerning the equal moral dignity retained by all soldiers (even when armed) during warfare. [2] Instead, few audiences are fully pleased with this book. The generally lukewarm response is best captured by Gregory Foster, a decorated Vietnam veteran and professor at National Defense University in Washington, D.C.: 'It certainly deserves to be read, though less for the answers it provides than for the profound questions it raises.' [3]

In some respects this reception is appropriate (and, as I will argue below, some of the criticism should be taken further), but in other respects it is a shame. There is much of value in some of Sherman's insights – certainly more than having just raised profound questions – and that value should not be lost.

By strange coincidence, Nancy Sherman's *Stoic Warriors* made its appearance in 2005 around the time that a well known 'Stoic warrior' – Vice Admiral James Stockdale – died. Sherman had interviewed Stockdale while conducting research for this book, and found that his words and attitude were almost indistinguishable from those of the Roman Stoic Epictetus, whose *Enchiridion* he had nearly committed to memory before his plane was shot down over Vietnam in 1965 and he was subjected to over seven years of torture in a POW camp. Epictetus's basic ethical teaching

is that good and evil reside only in what is entirely within our control: ‘virtuous agency,’ that is, choosing the correct attitudes and efforts when confronted with life’s challenges. It is thus essential to our happiness to ignore or dismiss anything that is not within our complete control, namely, anything ‘outside of us,’ such as other people, the consequences of our actions, the inevitable decay and death of the body, etc. Stockdale’s self-conscious Stoicism was crucial to his survival through that gruelling ordeal, but Sherman questions the wisdom of military personnel (and humans generally) adopting Stoicism as their code of ethics in a wholesale manner. Relying on the findings of some modern psychotherapists, most notably Jonathan Shay – a well-known therapist of war veterans and author of *Achilles in Vietnam* and *Odysseus in America* – she argues that the psychic and social costs of such a move (ranging from uncontrollable, destructive rage to extreme detachment from loved ones) exceed the benefits. Sherman ultimately advocates a ‘moderate,’ ‘gentle’ Stoicism rather than either orthodox Stoicism or what she regards as a promising, but insufficiently cosmopolitan, Aristotelian moral psychology.

An enlisted man wonders what possessed him to sign up for service as his drill sergeant screams obscenities in his face. A soldier freezes on the battlefield when confronted for the first time with the need to kill an enemy. Another soldier dismembers an enemy while he is still alive as a way of ‘getting even’ for the death of a beloved comrade. A war veteran springs upon his young son and puts him in a painful headlock because the boy leapt out to surprise his dad with a water gun on a hot summer’s day. These scenarios are common enough to oblige military personnel, their families, and friends to need a satisfactory way of handling them. Sherman echoes the sentiments of many in regarding the ‘take-home lesson’ of military history to be ‘that we need to prepare soldiers better for the role transitions from civilian to warrior and warrior back to civilian’ (p. 119). In order to grapple with this ‘lesson,’ she explicitly focuses on *jus in bello* (‘the morality involved in fighting in war’) rather than *jus ad bellum* (‘the morality of the initial decision to go to war’), clearly seeing the two as involving fundamentally distinct moral considerations (p. x). In a significant way, *Stoic Warriors* continues some of the important work begun by Shay. If we look at the subtitle of his first book – *Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* – we see that it assumes that character was already ‘done’ before combat, thus inviting us to figure out both whether it had been ‘done’ properly and how it is to be ‘redone’ after combat. In short, nothing less than a full-blown ethical theory needs to be applied to every domain of military life before, during, and after combat service. Sherman thus systematically applies her moderate Stoicism to body image (chapter 2), decorum (chapter 3), anger

## BIONDI | Stoicism and the Military

(chapter 4), fear and resilience (chapter 5), grief (chapter 6), and individuality versus community (chapter 7).

Why is Stoicism the answer? The conventional understanding of ‘being stoic’ is to be unemotional or indifferent to pain. In part, Sherman begins with this popularised understanding of Stoicism because she thinks that many in the military embrace it in some form or other, sometimes as a Rambo-style ethos of ‘sucking it up’ or ‘toughing it out’ and sometimes merely as a version of the axiom ‘big boys and girls don’t cry.’ She quickly dispatches with this popular (mis)conception of Stoicism, though, not only because it is a misconception, but also because of how dangerously maladaptive it is. Being ‘tough’ is often taken to be synonymous with being physically impervious, which tends to lead both to an unhealthy preoccupation with body image and body-building and to great mental anguish at physical impairment. Sherman here describes some of the dysfunctional self-loathing and destructive rage connected to what is known as the ‘Adonis complex,’ which is a psychological neurosis-turned-obsession typically affecting men who think that they must live up to an ‘ideal’ of having a ‘perfect’ body sculpted like that of a Greek god (pp. 22-6). Such deep attachment to the physical body couldn’t be further from Stoicism, however, since someone like Epictetus thinks that ‘ultimately our bodies should be regarded as indifferents, not as intrinsic elements of our good’ (p. 21). ‘Indifferents’ on the Stoic view are ‘external goods, outside our full control, to which happiness is indifferent,’ so we should be able to relinquish such things with equanimity (p. 27).

There is a grain of truth in the popular understanding of Stoicism and Sherman spends a good part of the book wrestling with it. The popular misconception of Stoicism grows out of the orthodox Stoic ideal of the ‘sage,’ an ideal that Stockdale strove to approximate and other military personnel have tried emulating to varying degrees. For the sage, happiness or the good life ‘is complete and self-sufficient in the sense that it must be strictly within our control,’ which means that it is a self-cultivated state of soul that is rendered invulnerable to those ‘vicissitudes of life that come from loving and losing, from being healthy and infirm, from being subject to nature’s plentitude and famines and to the whims of tyrants, thugs, and captors’ (p. 27). Even the Stoics recognised that the ‘goal is austere and . . . next to impossible to realize fully,’ but they still regarded sagehood as the ideal of human moral perfection (p. 102). It is easy to see how the conception of spiritual or psychic invulnerability in orthodox Stoicism becomes physical invulnerability in its popularised version. And it is also easy to see the allure of orthodox Stoicism in military life, for it promises the soldier two attractive things: (1) effective training for becoming an efficacious

'first responder' by 'inoculating against the unknown, . . . strengthening agency against circumstance' (p. 126); and (2) a sense of detachment from the unavoidable pain, loss, death, and grief that come with military service. The former is a healthy form of empowerment, but the latter is a sort of psychological anaesthetic that comes at a steep price. Typical costs of orthodox Stoic repression can include either an inability to feel emotions any longer so that reintegration into post-service society (particularly family life, as in the 'Santini problem' [pp. 51-2]) is nearly impossible, or 'war rage' and 'berserking' that explode at the least provocation 'onto inappropriate objects' (p. 73). Both types of dysfunction – emotional coldness and savagery – cost the individual his humanity.

At this juncture, Sherman almost invariably brings Aristotle into the discussion as an initial corrective to orthodox Stoicism, whose name crops up on no less than twenty-six different pages in discussions of every major topic. Two primary things distinguish Aristotle's thought from orthodox Stoicism: (1) the necessity of external goods for the achievement of happiness and (2) the integration of the emotions into both the self and the attainment of moral virtue. With respect to the first point, happiness is seen by Aristotle as a combination of virtuous choice that is exercised on and with sufficient external goods. A merely Stoic 'generosity of intent' neither tests the character of the agent nor brings the prized virtues or their valued objects into existence. For example, in order to exercise the virtue of generosity, one needs to have the external goods of money or time and a suitable individual to whom one can give the money or time. Without the actual embodiment of and some success at performing, for example, a generous action, one cannot be generous or (when this is multiplied across all of the virtues) happy.

With respect to the second point, emotions 'can be made rational' rather than hijacking us (p. 33). For the Stoics, emotions are responses to things 'outside us' and are thus always 'irrational judgements,' because they show that we are falsely valuing external goods. Emotions are thus seen by Stoics as something foreign to us that derail us from true happiness. Aristotle's key point here, though, is that emotions are part of the self rather than foreign to it, and properly trained emotions are integral to human character-formation and happiness. Even the strong emotion of 'anger can be expressed in ways that are apt and appropriate,' so that we should praise the one 'who is angry at the right things and with the right people, and further, as he ought, when he ought, and as long as he ought' (p. 72). Sherman gives us the example of peacekeepers in Bosnia who, due to a command to follow international 'rules of engagement,' had to leave innocent people behind to be

## BIONDI | Stoicism and the Military

butchered by the Serbs engaged in ‘ethnic cleansing.’ She claims that it would be ‘a sign of the good soldier’s conscience’ to express ‘extreme anger,’ ‘moral outrage,’ and ‘moral despair’ at having to leave those innocents behind, as opposed to following the Stoic injunction to bear such things with emotional calm (p. 73). What makes anger in this sort of situation appropriate is that the innocents had done no wrong, the ground of ‘ethnic cleansing’ is unjustifiable, and the lives of the innocents were thus being violated inexcusably. Having a Stoic response of equanimity rather than an Aristotelian response of moral indignation to this scenario would ‘fail to respect self and others as beings with dignity and a sense of worth’ (p. 71).

Sherman comes closest outright to embracing Aristotle’s theory when discussing ‘the downsized self,’ that is, the inextricably social self that even the most self-sufficient soldiers depend on for a sense of meaning and support before, during, and after combat (pp. 156-61). She realises that orthodox and moderate Stoics alike ‘must necessarily be wary of the emotions’ that attachment to external goods such as friendship involve, and she complains that the Stoics ‘underplay the fortifying power of love, even as it opens us to those risks’ and ‘vastly underplay the vulnerability of virtue itself, in the absence of nurturing conditions of friendship and solidarity’ (p. 157). It very nearly sounds like Aristotle’s ethical theory will carry the day over Stoicism, but . . . not quite.

Rather than adopting Aristotle’s view, Sherman upholds what she calls a ‘moderate’ Stoicism. Regardless of whether she is applying moderate Stoicism to fear, anger, or grief, she first notes how this moderate view comes from the Stoics themselves, and then notes the advantages that it has over Aristotle’s view. As already noted, the Stoics realise that sagehood is a rarity. Sherman argues that the Stoics take this human condition into account and address their words to two different audiences: ‘The more human face of Stoicism also emerges when we adjust our focus, as Seneca often does, to include not only the sage but also the advanced moral learner . . . This is the morally decent yet morally imperfect adult’ (p. 104). The Aristotelian-sounding moderate Stoicism is thus nothing more than an encouraging guide for the typical morally imperfect human. What do the Stoics have that Aristotle lacks? Sherman thinks that Aristotle’s view, though on the right track, is ultimately too parochial:

We might say the Stoics begin where Aristotle leaves off. Aristotle emphasises face-to-face friendships and civic friendships within the city-state (*polis*); those outside civic borders are barbarians, due little in terms of respect or

goodwill. The Stoics emphasise the community that extends beyond political and familial boundaries; they establish a community that extends to all of humanity in virtue of shared reason. (p. 169)

She regards Aristotle's allegiance to one's friends and fellow citizens as easily leading to a 'demonization process that can be part of war's portrayal of the enemy' (p. 152), which in turn can unleash a 'vengeful violence' that 'undoes a sense of humanity, in ourselves and in others' (p. 178). Essentially, Sherman thinks that 'a lesson in Stoic cosmopolitanism' (p. 152) is the only way to avoid another My Lai massacre or Abu Ghraib scandal. She approvingly cites Michael Walzer on seeing war as 'a rule-governed activity of *equals*' whereby 'some form of proportionality' is observed in how war is conducted (p. 173). Not shrinking from the challenge that terrorism poses for her thesis, Sherman goes so far as to uphold the moral equivalency of all combatants even 'when war is waged against terrorists,' though '[t]o fight clean can seem like fighting with one arm tied behind one's back.' She cites as evidence of the general demand for such a Stoic doctrine in the middle of the War on Terror the fact that 'moral outrage was the predominant response in Senate hearings and national public media to the Abu Ghraib prison abuses' (p. 173).

We can now turn back to some of the questions raised above about the reception of *Stoic Warriors*. How could such a timely book that is apparently in step with the leanings of the academy and whose conclusions could be used as part of 'damage control' for the United States' image at home and abroad not fare better than it has with critics? Part of the tepid response can be accounted for by the fact that the book is clearly intended for a mixed audience of academics, professional military personnel, and generally concerned citizens. It is hardly surprising, then, that Classics professor Liz Gloyn, who finds some value in the book, complains that Sherman 'can resolve problems rather too quickly' in the service of writing 'her own new textbook' for use at military academies, which 'can become frustrating to the reader who is accustomed to more in-depth analysis.' [4] I suspect, though, that Gloyn objects less to the supposed lack of philosophical rigor in the book than to the fact that Sherman does not carry Stoic cosmopolitanism to pacifist extremes: 'Sherman never asks whether our fundamental identity as humans is incompatible with the function of the modern military.' Gloyn attributes this (supposed) omission to Sherman's 'concern for this audience [of military personnel], a decision that reflects an intent not to undermine the *raison d'être* of an army that must kill people.' [5] Perhaps Sherman does not wish to alienate a big part of her intended

## BIONDI | Stoicism and the Military

audience, but based on what she says in her book it is more likely that she accepts the unfortunate necessity of warfare and feels driven to her moderate Stoic thesis as a way of minimising the tragedy of warfare.

Other readers of Sherman's book find her thesis unclear and even confusing. With so much mention made of Aristotle's view, why not just defend Aristotle and rename the book 'Peripatetic Warriors'? [6] Sherman is (we are told) so 'keen to find in Stoicism her own favoured version of Aristotelianism' that '[i]n a deep sense the title of Sherman's book is a misnomer. What she wants are Aristotelian warriors.' [7] Sherman walks a fine line much of the time between moderate Stoicism and Aristotle's virtue ethics, but she clearly endorses the former over the latter. One might think that she *should* have endorsed an Aristotelian approach, but that is different from whether she in fact does.

The most intriguing response to *Stoic Warriors* has come from those who accuse Sherman of neglecting the central role of religion in Roman Stoicism (which is the variety of Stoicism that Sherman draws upon). Indeed, Sherman mentions religion only once (on p. 58), and that is simply to put it on a list of 'accidents' of circumstance such as gender or race. Christopher Toner would have liked to see Sherman discuss the role of religion, since it is 'rather more central to "the military mind" than she lets on: it is an old saying that there are no atheists in foxholes.' [8] Phillip Mitsis is far less gentle than Toner on this point. Having read Stockdale's books and the Stoic texts, Mitsis points out that '[f]or Stoics, rational providence guarantees the moral economy of the world, and Stockdale echoes this continually.' He further speculates that 'perhaps because of her own relentless tendency to psychologise issues, Sherman never mentions this crucial aspect of Stoicism,' an omission which he finds 'especially odd' in light of 'unprecedented conversions to Evangelicism among American troops.' Mitsis also reports the feedback of an 'old Vietnam buddy' who is a philosophy professor and had some choice words for *Stoic Warriors*: 'What I got . . . was Oprah telling me how I needed to get in touch with my inner needy child. You know Stockdale's views on bleeding hearts and faux psychobabble. I bet he is rolling over in his grave.' [9] While Sherman may well have overlooked a significant religious dimension of Stoicism in the lives of many soldiers (Stockdale's included), the book's focus on psychology is not fairly or accurately described as the 'faux psychobabble' of a 'bleeding heart.' In fact, the book's specifically psychological analysis is arguably its most valuable contribution.

Let us set aside the critical reception of *Stoic Warriors*, some of which is unfair and some of which though fair is either incomplete or focuses on non-essentials. The central question still remains. Could Sherman's moderate Stoicism be the tonic for an ailing military ethos as manifested in the My Lai massacre, gratuitous torture of POWs the world over, and the continued prevalence of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)? In my view, the short answer is, 'Not really.' To see why, we need to challenge Sherman's repeated insistence that moderate Stoicism is a coherent and morally tenable view. In fact, her best insights – and there are many – occur when she is at her most Aristotelian. What she calls her 'moderate Stoicism' is a watered-down and half-hearted Stoicism whose most defensible features are straightforwardly Aristotelian.

The *essence* of Stoicism is its depiction of the moral ideal, the Stoic sage. Recall that the Stoic sage is the perfect person, to whose example the rest of us imperfect beings can only struggle as toward an *unrealisable* standard. The life of the sage is humanly unrealisable because he is as self-sufficient and removed from the concerns of physical life as one could be short of being dead. But this alleged 'ideal' is false and inhumane, because humans are physically embodied beings comprised of reason and emotion. Ought implies can: It makes no sense for embodied beings like us to strive toward (or even bear in mind) an ideal formulated in abstraction from what we are and can do. Sherman approvingly cites a passage on friendship from Aristotle's *Magna Moralia* in which he notes that '[w]e are investigating the self-sufficiency *not of a god, but of what is human*' (p. 156, emphasis added). But this is the very opposite of the point of Stoic investigation. Why drop this essential context simply to avow a nominal Stoicism?

Sherman explicitly shies away from a full embrace of Aristotle's theory because he regards all non-Greeks as barbarians, which she thinks will lead to torture and sadistic butchery. This is rather weak evidence on which to indict Aristotle's ethics. It is not that I agree with Aristotle's claim that all non-Greeks are barbarians, but that an Aristotelian moral theory can easily jettison this claim and retain all that is valuable from Aristotle's ethics – including its humane conception of the self and its demand for rigorous and precise contextual moral judgement.

It is this element of Aristotelian contextual judgement (in contrast to Stoic universalistic rule-following) that I believe leads Sherman to favour moderate Stoicism over Aristotelian moral theory. She notes once in passing that she is focusing on *jus in bello* concerns rather than on *jus ad bellum*. However, this



## BIONDI | Stoicism and the Military

separation does more work for Sherman's thesis than it appears to. By the end of the book, it is pretty clear that she regards the justifiedness of a war as *irrelevant* to examining how it is fought. This is a very strong assumption to make, and it does the bulk of the work in propping up the Stoic cosmopolitanism thesis about the moral equivalence of all soldiers. However, one cannot simply assume that it makes no moral difference whether an enemy one is confronting on the battlefield has justice on his side or not. If I am facing an enemy who initiated force against my country with the intention of enslaving the population and raping its women, then I can judge that it is best – and even a good thing – to destroy such an enemy rather than forbear doing so. I can do this without enjoying being placed in the situation of destroying the enemy, without thinking that I need to layer gratuitous torture onto the killing, and without worrying that I will turn into a murderous savage. The option set suggested by Sherman of 'Stoic cosmopolitan' or 'demonizing war machine' is a false alternative.

Stoicism and military ethics do not make a fitting pair, though the cover of *Stoic Warriors* makes them seem so with its depiction of soldiers lined up bearing grim expressions. [10] Determination and seriousness should not, however, be mistaken for Stoicism. On either the liberal cosmopolitan variant that Sherman puts forth or the orthodox variant with its religious overtones (as noted by Mitsis and Toner), Stoicism lacks the resources needed coherently to wage war. War-making matters because there is something of value at stake to which one is attached and which is being threatened by initiators of violence who are no longer morally on a par with peaceful individuals. It is Aristotelian theory – with its *eudaimonistic* virtue ethics, its fierce love of an integrated self, and its promotion of the context of values that makes the good life possible – that makes sense out of fighting and even dying for a genuine 'just war' and to do so in a way that does not undermine what makes war worth fighting, namely, the preservation of one's humanity. [11]

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## Democratiya 11 | Winter 2007

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### Notes

- [1] Accessed online at: <http://nancysherman.net/schedule.html>.
- [2] I have in mind Michael Walzer's discussion of this issue in Walzer 2006, pp. 34-47, esp. pp. 34-7. Such a view regards soldiers as legitimate targets only when they are immediate threats, so it would be 'unfair,' for example, to shoot an enemy soldier while he was taking a shower. Also, 'excessive' force would be prohibited even against an armed enemy.
- [3] Foster 2005, p. 27.
- [4] Gloyn 2006. The allusion to Sherman's writing 'her own new textbook' refers to the fact that Sherman had assigned a previous book of hers while teaching at the U.S. Naval Academy in 1997-1999.
- [5] Gloyn 2006.
- [6] Toner 2006.
- [7] Mitsis 2006.
- [8] Toner 2006.
- [9] Mitsis 2006.
- [10] This incompatibility is not lost on Thorne 2007, p. 121: 'But why would a Stoic be a soldier? To disavow striving over what is outside one's self, and then to enter the world of affairs with military zeal seems an inconsistency . . . unworthy of lovers of wisdom.' This quotation echoes the concern raised in Gloyn 2006.
- [11] I am grateful to Irfan Khawaja for valuable feedback on an earlier version of this essay.