

# Review of Nancy Sherman, "Stoic Warriors: The Ancient Philosophy behind the Military Mind"

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Nancy Sherman, *Stoic Warriors:  
The Ancient Philosophy behind the Military Mind*,  
Oxford University Press, New York, 2005  
(xii + 242 pp., ISBN 978-0-19-515216-6 [hb];  
ISBN 0-19-531591-X [pb])

The book under review proceeds from the assumption that the military – that is mainly the US military – embodies a set of values and habits that can be plausibly related to the teachings of ancient Stoics. An exploration of the similarities and contrasts between the military values and habits and Stoic teachings is supposed to accomplish two tasks. First, it is supposed to tell us something about Stoic teachings, in particular ‘how can tensions internal to the ancient debate itself instruct us about the attractions and dangers of austere self-control and discipline’ (p. ix). Second, it is supposed to tell us something about the values and habits of the modern military, as it is and as it should be. To achieve these two tasks, Sherman focuses on the later Stoics, primarily Seneca and Epictetus, with ample use of Cicero. The late Stoics are thus the backdrop against which the views of orthodox Stoics are criticised and against which a picture of a good soldier and human beings is painted.

In Chapter 1 we are introduced to some basic tenets of Stoicism through the story of James B. Stockdale, a senior Navy pilot who was shot down over Vietnam in 1965 and who put his intimate knowledge of Epictetus to work in a prisoner-of-war camp. The story is not that of a Sage remaining unscathed through daily tortures, but more plausibly, of a non-Sage whose Epictetus ‘enabled him to regain his dignity, if and when he broke in torture’ (p. 6).

Chapter 2 deals with attitudes towards the body. Sherman evokes the Stoic view that the body and its preferred states (health, fitness, beauty) are indifferents in order to criticise the obsession with big muscular bodies to which the military is particularly susceptible. On the other hand, she finds it difficult to accept the other part of the Stoic view, namely that the body and its dispreferred states (disease, weakness, disfigurement) are also indifferents, things that have no effect whatsoever on one’s happiness. ‘Indeed, we admire and are inspired by those who seem to find happiness despite severe bodily harm,’ Sherman writes. ‘But not all find that happiness, and toward them (...) compassion is appropriate, not Stoic reproof’ (p. 41).

The military puts a great emphasis on appearance, manners, and comportment, so it was a good idea to include a discussion of *decorum*. In Chapter 3 Sherman argues that ‘displays of attitude in body language, facial demeanour, tone of voice, and so on are critical elements of doing what is appropriate, regardless of whether they faithfully represent what is inside’ (p. 63). Although philosophers with cynic sympathies would denounce this as hypocrisy, Sherman argues that this attitude is necessary for successful role-playing on which the military hierarchy depends, and it is also beneficial as a way of coaxing inner change.

The next three chapters deal with the emotions of anger, fear, and grief, which soldiers are especially likely to experience. Sherman sides with Aristotle against the Stoics in the view that emotions need control, not eradication. Moreover, she argues that there are occasions when it is appropriate for soldiers to express emotions and when it is appropriate not to do so. She aptly distinguishes different kinds of anger in Chapter 4, and argues that some of its kinds, such as indignation or outrage, are essential to good moral character. ‘To feel outrage in bearing witness to torture, massacre or rape is a fundamental response to human violation, and a fundamental way we protest the shame and abject servility that violence inflicts. These responses are a part of our humanity to cultivate, not excise’ (p. 89).

Chapter 5 explores various issues relating to fear and resilience. The anticipation of fearful situations in which one can get killed or severely injured, or indeed in which one can kill or inflict injuries, makes Stoicism appealing to soldiers. However, Sherman argues that the cost of invulnerability is too high. ‘If we are to prepare ourselves to see the loss of children and friends as little different from bidding adieu to a favourite crystal goblet that breaks, then what is the point of building a life around family and friends, or of fighting for and beside men and women who come to be, in essence, family? This is the unacceptable face of orthodox Stoicism’ (p. 104). Sherman appeals to Seneca’s more lenient views of fear and argues that there are legitimate fears which protect not only our own humanity, but that of the others too. This chapter includes some vivid anecdotes against which Sherman tests Stoic theories, an interesting discussion of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), and the problem of regaining one’s aversion to killing after return to civilian life.

The shortest chapter, Chapter 6, is on grief and on appropriate decorum in mourning. Sherman appeals to Cicero’s ideas about a therapy of grief developed in the *Tusculan Disputations*. She maintains that ‘collective grieving, after the fray of battle but not long after a death, can provide the crucial moment of

solidarity needed for owning grief and for beginning the process of healing' (p. 138).

The last chapter, entitled 'The Downsized Self', deals with the place of various kinds of social bonds in our lives, asserting their utility and restorative power. Sherman argues that the Stoics severely undervalued the role our relationships with others play in our lives, yet she finds their cosmopolitanism and a sense of shared humanity appealing. The ability to empathize – 'to enter into the ruling part of others and to let everyone else enter into one's own', as Marcus Aurelius puts it in *Meditations* VIII.61 – is the fundament from which respect for other human beings flows. Sherman seems to think that every soldier should cultivate this ability, and that a failure to do so brought about dismal violations of the Geneva conventions in the Abu Ghraib prison.

Sherman starts with the assumption, apparently supported by her experience as Distinguished Professor in ethics at the US Naval Academy in Annapolis, that Stoicism is naturally appealing to soldiers, because it promises happiness even in the toughest of circumstances. It is a view of life which makes one impervious to obnoxious superiors, exhausting trainings, vicissitudes of the battlefield, physical and psychological traumas. Stoic philosophy appears to be a bullet-proof vest for the mind. However, Sherman does not seem to think that orthodox Stoicism is a viable philosophy of life. More importantly, she does not think that soldiers in particular should strive for it, essentially because it would make them bad soldiers and deficient human beings. Sherman seems to believe that orthodox Stoicism would make them bad soldiers because it would diminish their 'capacity for moral reasoning' and reduce their 'ability to lead others in difficult and deadly circumstances' (p. ix). It would make them deficient human beings because 'it is a flawed ideal that constricts our social and emotional natures' (p. 151).

Obviously, Sherman's distaste for orthodox Stoicism follows from a certain number of fundamental assumptions about human nature. For instance, she assumes that we are emotional by nature, that emotions play an important role in the lives of civilians and especially in the lives of soldiers, and that our strength and happiness crucially depends on our social bonds. Such assumptions are not unreasonable or illegitimate, but they are incompatible with the assumptions which lie at the core of Stoic philosophy. As is well-known, the Stoics insist that we are rational by nature, that our emotions are dangerous cognitive failures to be eliminated altogether, and that our sociability has little to do with our happiness. Sherman makes little effort to discuss these key assumptions on their own merit and to explore their motivation and philosophical significance.

Indeed, one of my main objections to this book is that the orthodox Stoics are not given a voice.

In accordance with her fundamental assumptions, then, Sherman paints a very different picture of a moral human being and a good soldier. In her picture control is ‘temper[ed] with forgiveness, soldierly strength with tolerance for human frailty’, self-reliance and can-do-spirit are valued as well as fellowship and mutual support (p. 12). She finds support for her picture in Cicero and the late Stoics and she is often ready to abandon Stoicism altogether in favour of Aristotelian views. Sherman is aware that her picture is eclectic and she duly warns the reader that her book is not a comprehensive guide to Stoic theory. Nevertheless, she claims that her picture ‘has its roots in a number of key Stoic texts’ which she explores in the book, and she appears to think of her picture as a version of ‘healthy Stoicism’.

I do not wish to raise objections to Sherman’s picture, nor do I doubt that it can be supported by a selection of passages from the late Stoics. I would only argue that her picture cannot be called ‘Stoic’ by any stretch of the term. The fact of the matter is that her picture is incompatible with the basic tenets of Stoicism, as I have pointed out, and the passages on which she draws often deal with issues that are peripheral to the core of Stoicism, such as passages from Epictetus on body and hygiene in Chapter 2, or passages from Cicero and Seneca on decorum in Chapter 3. The passages that come closer to the core of Stoic doctrines, such as those quoted in the central chapters that deal with emotions, are discussed either somewhat selectively or critically. Hence, Sherman does not really offer us a vision of Stoic warriors, as the catchy title of the book suggests. Rather, it is a vision of enlightened warriors inspired by Sherman’s selective reading of the late Stoics.

Perhaps one can defend the appropriateness of the title of this book by saying that its intention is not to give us the author’s vision of Stoic warriors, but to offer a critical discussion of the stoicism appealing to, or built into, the modern military. In other words, the ‘Stoic warriors’ from the title are the modern soldiers who cherish some orthodox Stoic values such as austere self-control and self-reliance, and the author’s intention is to show that this ‘ancient philosophy behind the military mind’ is deficient and needs to be softened; for that purpose, Sherman appeals to the later Stoics who saw these deficiencies and pointed at the ways of assuaging them. In that case, however, the ‘Stoic warriors’ are not given a proper chance to defend the values they cherish, since the views and arguments of the orthodox Stoics, on which these values hinge, receive little or no attention.

I have a few quibbles, too. Sherman talks of the Socratic distinction between external goods, such as wealth, and internal goods, such as wisdom

(p. 10). First, it is misleading to formulate the distinction developed by Plato's Socrates in terms of external and internal goods. Socrates speaks of things that are unconditionally beneficial and things that are sometimes beneficial and sometimes harmful, depending on how they are used. According to Socrates in the *Meno* and *Euthydemus*, health, for example, falls in the latter category, but it is neither an external good such as wealth, nor an internal good such as wisdom. Second, there is a footnote following the introduction of this Socratic distinction, but it fails to make reference to the works in which the Socratic distinction is put forth, notably Plato's *Meno* 87E–88A, *Euthydemus* 281D–E, and *Gorgias* 467E *ff.*

On p. 72 we learn that 'Aristotle never denies that most emotions have a certain kind of "feel". As he puts it, they are "accompanied" by pleasure and pain (and sometimes physiological feels, like the boiling of blood around the heart), but those feels cannot constitute the emotion independent of the thought content to which they attach.' Boiling of the blood around the heart is indeed mentioned in Aristotle's *De Anima* I.1 403<sup>a</sup>31 as the material aspect of anger, but that does not at all warrant the inference to the existence of 'physiological feels.'

On p. 73 we find a reference to the sad events that took place in Srebrenica in July 1995, when eight thousand Muslims were executed by the Army of Bosnian Serbs. Sherman mentions that the peacekeepers were so constrained by rules of engagement that they were unable to help innocents from perishing. 'We can think of their extreme anger at being commanded to let innocents die as a form of moral outrage.' I prefer to think of their shame for allowing themselves to be bullied by Ratko Mladić and his gunmen, and for failing to take a firmer stand in negotiations, even within the restrictive rules of engagement imposed on them. Let us remember that in 2002, after the publication of the official report on the events in Srebrenica, the Dutch government took responsibility for the shameful conduct of their peacekeeping forces stationed in Srebrenica, and the entire Dutch cabinet resigned. Therefore, Sherman's invitation to think about 'the extreme anger' of the Dutch peacekeepers seems to me to be entirely misplaced.

Finally, I spotted a few minor mistakes. The name of Socrates' wise interlocutor in the *Symposium* is twice misspelt as 'Diotema' on p. 32. On p. 63 Darwin is called a psychologist, along with P. Ekman, which is somewhat unusual. On p. 133 Sherman says that 'we are *zōē politikē*, political or social creatures', whereas the correct Greek would be *zōa politika*. Although the office of the superintendent of the Naval Academy may be an exalted one, we really do not need to be informed twice in two successive sentences on p. 2 that

Admiral Charles Larson held that office, especially not if we've been told so a few pages earlier in the Preface.

Despite these shortcomings, Sherman's book is worth reading for a sensible picture of a good soldier that it paints with the help of selected Stoic passages, and especially for the wealth of anecdotal material which succeeds in bringing the quoted passages to life. As long as one does not approach the book as a guide either to Stoicism or to the actual military mind, one is likely to find it enjoyable.

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