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Studies in the History of Ethics

REVIEW

Nancy Sherman, Stoic Warriors: The Ancient Philosophy Behind the Military Mind
(Oxford University Press, 2005)

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Unlike their hero Socrates, who in one of antiquity's taller war stories, warded off enemies in the Athenian retreat from Potidaea with a mere goose-like glance (*Symposium* 221b*)*, Zeno, Cleanthes, and Chrysippus, the founding fathers of Stoicism, were foreign metics who never served Athens in any military capacity. Moreover, what we have of their political theory suggests they were the original commie peaceniks. They were dead set against currencies, law courts, and private property, and gung ho for same sex dressing, incest, Zeus's universal laws, and world peace. How is it, one might well wonder, that Stoicism seems to have achieved such a vogue among America's military elite, not to mention among legions of vicarious warriors on Wall Street?

Sherman claims that there is a natural and deep relation between military values and those attitudes that in common parlance we take to be "stoic". But I doubt this gets us very far toward an adequate explanation of the recent buzz, since a quick shake out of our conceptions shows rather more tenuous and contingent connections. We can easily imagine Gandhi, for instance, taking slaps from British officers "stoically" or generations of downtrodden, starving peasants enduring nature's blows with "stoicism". In this sense, "stoic" is just as readily associated with peace, agriculture, and stray dogs faced with fleas. By the same token, Achilles, Alexander,

Napoleon, and Patton hardly conjure up visions of stoic calm and indifference. Accounts of military excellence have and will continue to get on just fine without any necessary reference to stoicism. At the same time, Sherman offers no historical evidence of any longstanding or systematic links between Stoicism and America's military ethos. So the question remains. What is behind the recent vogue for Stoicism among America's military and economic warriors, especially since it seems to be both recent and a vogue?

Enter Vice Admiral James Bond Stockdale. In September of 1965, as a navy pilot with a penchant for reading his life through Stoic texts, Stockdale was shot down in Vietnam and held prisoner for over seven years. He underwent horrendous tortures but emerged thanking Providence for granting him the kind of physical and moral tests that revealed to him the true nature of his own autonomy and character. Writing about his experiences as both a believing Stoic and distinguished military hero, he gained a fair amount of public notice and immense respect from America's military elite. He also eventually came to the attention of academic philosophers, who, rather predictably, tended to treat him as if someone had just thawed and brought to life a wooly mammoth. This, I believe, was a mistake. After reading Stockdale, pick up any typical academic publication with some of the same goals, say, like *The Stoic Life*, by Tab Brennan, and it is easy to come away with the feeling that one is merely whiling away time in what Stockdale calls "the big easy world of yakety yak" with a fellow glib, gutless, academic popinjay. Pick up Stockdale, and one feels as if some ancient Stoic has whispered in one's ear "tolle, lege."

My main disappointment with Sherman's book is that, although she begins with a mention of Stockdale, she never really takes his example seriously, and thus often misses what in my view is most central about Stoicism and, if one believes military handbooks, military ethos as well.

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Stockdale's intellectual journey began with him being drawn to a philosophy professor who argued that there was no moral economy in the universe. Stoic arguments and prison convinced him otherwise. For Stoics, rational providence guarantees the moral economy of the world, and Stockdale echoes this continually: "Nothing that is natural can be evil. Death cannot be evil. Disease cannot be evil. . . .The universe as a whole is perfect, and everything in it has a place in the overall design."[1] Perhaps relying on some recent accounts of Stoicism that are embarrassed by this theological dimension, or perhaps because of her own relentless tendency to psychologize issues, Sherman never mentions this crucial aspect of Stoicism, though presumably it makes no small difference if one is convinced that the torture one is facing is part of God's overall plan. It certainly did in Stockdale's case. Sherman makes use of a series of highly rhetorical arguments and photographs to depict the psychological trauma of war; but she nowhere comes to grips with religious belief or Stockdale's belief in the universe's rational moral economy. This omission seems especially odd, given that the wars in Iraq, which she mostly focuses on, have seen, in addition to the extremes of Islamic fundamentalism, unprecedented conversions to Evangelicalism among American troops. Certainly, a basic canon of military ethos is that soldiers have to believe that they are laying down their lives for a reason. Sherman's book registers a deadening silence about all such reasons at the level of theological faith or rational moral conviction.

Sherman claims that her book is about "sucking it up." But of course "sucking it up" has nothing to do with ancient Stoics or Stockdale. What Stockdale rightly took himself to be doing was not gritting his teeth in the face of some pressing evil, but in viewing what he was facing as a matter of moral indifference. Sherman has little patience for such claims and typically does little more than appeal to common intuitions or rhetorical formulations to bypass them. "Don't

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we all really think torture is horrible?" "Shouldn't we all be outraged at the torture of innocents at Abu Ghraib?" But I hardly think the Stoics or Stockdale would or should find such appeals to intuitions sufficient to move them. Here is Stockdale on his torturer: "In all those years, we probably had no more than twenty hours, one on one, together. But neither of us ever broke the code of an unvarying strict line of duty relationship. He never tricked me, always played it straight, and I begged no mercy. I admired that in him, and I could tell he did in me. And when people say, "he was your torturer, don't you *hate* him?" "I say," like Solzhenitsyn, "to the astonishment of those about me," "No, he was a good soldier, and never overstepped his line of duty." [2] The Stoic is prepared to astonish and violate common intuitions, and it seems to me that there is enough of gritty moral interest in Stockdale's claim to warrant more than quick rhetorical dismissals.

Sherman spends a fair amount of time trying to reconstruct a tension internal to ancient Stoicism between harder Stockdalian forms of Stoicism and a more "humane" sort. The "humane" sort of Stoicism Sherman approves of seems suspiciously close to her and Nussbaum's Aristotelianism, but I doubt many scholars of Stoicism will take this attempt very seriously. (I leave aside, for the moment, the larger ironies involved in her showing how ancient Stoic peaceniks have values inadequate to the psychological and moral demands of humanely pursuing a war, like the present one in Iraq.) Sherman argues that we can use Cicero's *De officiis* to reconstruct an ancient "Stoic" version of "sucking it up", or more politely, "decorum" in which one puts a good public face on underlying emotional turmoil. The problem, of course, is that Cicero is quite frank about his ability to diverge from Stoicism and it seems pretty clear that *De officiis* is here describing features of common Roman mores, not setting out the prescriptions of Stoic doctrine. Her attempt to find corresponding forms of more "humane"

Stoicism in Seneca is similarly implausible. Seneca's charting of his addressee's and his own emotional weaknesses hardly marks an attempt to formulate a competing, softer Aristotelian form of Stoicism. It is merely a hard Stoic examination of what needs to be overcome.

We might ask, of course, why Sherman is so keen to find in Stoicism her own favored version of Aristotelianism. Her central reason, no doubt, and perhaps the central argument of her book is that she wants to make room for moral emotions that are important both in well-integrated human psychologies and for picking out salient moral phenomena. Thus, for example, she chides hard Stoicism for being unable to value the emotion of moral outrage and in a typical stretch of rhetorically loaded argument cites the private therapeutic and public benefits of moral outrage against rape, torture, battering women, Nazism, and genocidal rape. (84) However, she offers no criterion for distinguishing such cases of moral outrage from, say, my moral outrage focused on her habit of interviewing male soldiers alone without a chaperone and without being properly veiled, and the private and public therapeutic benefits of my seeing her whipped in a town square for such moral transgressions. This inability to individuate cases of moral outrage on the basis of any moral criteria brings us, I believe, to the central problem of her book.

Throughout, Sherman relies on a hodgepodge of psychological claims and statistics to show the inadequacy of hard Stoicism. Freud, Klein, Zimbardo, etc. are trotted out in succession and Stoic arguments are again and again found wanting in comparison. The problem, however, is that if one buys into Ratman, one really does not get to appeal to Aristotle either, not to mention all of ancient ethics and what passes for ethical argument generally. As Freud himself is eager to point out, psychologizing issues in this reductive way means giving up any commitment to the autonomy of moral argument or ethics in general. If we reduce Stoic calmness to neurotic disassociation, for instance, what allows us to view noble Aristotelian anger as anything more

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than mechanical aggression resulting from thwarted instincts? At the heart of the Stoic's moral theory is an attempt to show how we can move from psychological explanations to rational moral argument. Sherman nowhere follows their lead and thus fails to give any convincing moral justifications for her defense of the emotions.

In a deep sense, the title of Sherman's book is a misnomer. What she wants are Aristotelian warriors, and her book has much to tell us because she has an undeniable knack for exploring the psychology of human suffering. But any Stoic scholar is bound to be offended by her cavalier treatment of the ancient evidence. For instance, she plausibly emphasizes the importance of community and comradeship in the military. Predictably, however, she concludes that Aristotle's account of friendship gives us better insight into this sense of community than the Stoics, which she takes to be objectionably self-referential. Yet, she merely tosses off this claim without looking at or citing one actual text on Stoic friendship. (157) Stoic friendship is a complex topic, but Zeno claims, like Aristotle, that a friend is another self (Diognes, *Lives* 7.23). And these Stoic arguments about friends are tied in interesting and important ways to larger Stoic claims about cosmopolitanism and respect. Stockdale, of course, is on to this and argues that military comradeship requires a deeper sense of community than can be sustained by mere Aristotelian friendships.[3] But again, in touting her version of Aristotelianism, she fails to adequately explore the resources of hard Stoic theory as well as some actual realities of military ethos.

I close with a final methodological worry. Sherman mixes ethnology with philosophical argument. We have little means, however, of assessing the distorting effects on stories being told to a women ethics professor with a particular view of human psychology and human interactions. No doubt, a sympathetic ear can gain access to realms of psychological turmoil that often remain

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unspoken in the macho world of male warriors. At the same time, however, Sherman gives such a misleading account of the one person I knew and whose writings we have, that it makes me uneasy about the rest. I would therefore like to close with my own bit of military ethnography. On a recent visit to an old Vietnam buddy who is now teaching philosophy, I noticed that he had Sherman's book on his shelves. When I mentioned to him that I was about to review it, he said he had already read it. "I was expecting a more scholarly Stockdale or perhaps a history of military leaders influenced by Stoicism. What I got instead 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." Not of course, that my friend would ever have said this to Sherman publicly--that is, if he ever said it exactly in these words at all.

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NOTES

[1] Stockdale, Jim, *Thoughts of a Philosophical Fighter Pilot* (Stanford, 1995) p.233
[2] Stockdale (1995) p. 232.
[3] Stockdale (1995) p.8.

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