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Nancy Sherman, *Stoic Warriors: The Ancient Philosophy behind the Military Mind*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. Pp. xii, 242. ISBN 978-0-19-531591-2.

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In this engaging and thoughtful book, Nancy Sherman combines her knowledge of ancient philosophy with her recent experiences as a visiting professor of ethics at the U.S. Naval Academy. Currently serving as University Professor at Georgetown University, Sherman analyzes the military through the lens of the ancient philosophy of Stoicism, as expressed in the works of Seneca, Epictetus, and others. While the book makes no attempt to trace Stoicism from the ancients to modern times, it argues that the central tenets of Stoicism provide a means to understand military culture and the responses of military personnel to stresses and trauma. The consequences of the Stoicism inherent in military culture are deeper and in many ways more disturbing than they appear on the surface. They are, in Sherman's eyes, both blessings and curses.

To the modern eye, Stoicism calls to mind the challenge to "suck it up" in the face of adversity and to absorb unusual physical and emotional stress. As a philosophy, of course, Stoicism was much more complex. Sherman draws on those elements that best express her central thesis of the appeal of Stoicism to "the military mind," beginning with the fundamental notion that happiness depends exclusively on one's own virtue. Those "indifferents" that rest beyond one's control must be treated with proper decorum and outward comportment. The key is to recognize which elements lie outside human control and adjust one's external responses accordingly.

The appeal of Stoicism to the military, those members of society tasked with killing and perhaps being killed in the defense of the state, is evident. Military personnel must occasionally deal with imprisonment, dismemberment, the act of killing another human being, and the process of grieving for a lost comrade. Emotional responses to such events, the Stoics argued, form false opinions of the nature of good and evil; one should react to such stresses with reason and logic. Discipline, self-control, and decorum are the correct Stoic reactions to external indifferents, and virtue comes less from avoiding the horrors of life that lie outside our control than from crafting appropriate responses to them.

The appeal of Stoicism to the military has led its legacies to be deeply ingrained in the military mindset. Indeed, Stoicism offers so much to the modern soldier or marine that it becomes internalized as part of military training. Thus even soldiers who have never heard of the philosophy nevertheless adopt important components of it into their own psychological defense mechanisms. Sherman's core argument is that this internalization of Stoicism gives military personnel a set of tools for processing trauma, but also sets up expectations of physical and psychic invulnerability that are in the end impossible to maintain.

The ways that the military distinguishes itself from civil society complicate the Stoic reactions of military men and women to the horrors they may one day face. Military person-

nel, on the whole young and in excellent physical condition, are the members of society most at risk of death or physical dismemberment. The Stoics recognized this problem, identifying the body itself as an indifferent that cannot contribute to happiness on its own because it can be destroyed by elements outside one's own control. The military's emphasis on the perfection of the body and the importance of its looking good in a uniform underscores a key theme of Sherman's book. Stoic philosophy requires wounded and disabled soldiers to display a "can do" spirit about their injuries that makes the most out of a situation one cannot control. Yet it also creates an unrealistic expectation for young men and women who must deal with traumatic loss.

To cite another example: although the military occasionally encourages its members to think as individuals (to be an "Army of One"), it relies heavily on the close interpersonal and social networks formed by small-unit dynamics and comradeship. Indeed, it is hard to envision a military functioning without them. These paradoxes compromise the ability of military members to form the proper psychological responses to the trials they must endure. On the one hand, their individualism compels them to act in ways that maximize their chances of survival; on the other, their social relations can compel even those who hate war the most to return to combat to endure trauma alongside their comrades.

These themes come together most effectively in the chapter on grief. The Stoics saw grief as an emotional response to be avoided, as it is directed at circumstances beyond individual control. Because the individual cannot prevent the death of a loved one resulting from accident or disease, he or she must accept loss as an indifferent; thus the response of one Stoic to the death of his daughter was that he should not grieve because he knew all along that his child was a mortal. Grieving, moreover, demonstrates that one has developed an attachment to another person, thus increasing one's own emotional vulnerability.

Such responses seem to us outdated if not cruel. In modern societies we are encouraged to grieve and feel emotion as a part of recovery from a sense of loss. The Stoics would have looked aghast at the greeting cards one can send to express grief over the loss of a family pet. They argued that because grief dwells on what can never be recovered, it is a misplaced emotion and should be discarded.

Grief and loss, however, are part and parcel of military culture, especially during wartime. It would be unreasonable of even the hardest of modern Stoics to expect military personnel not to grieve the loss of a comrade. Death in war is especially tragic, as it cuts down young people, often in horrific ways. In some cases, the power of military weaponry or the location of a soldier's death prevents even the recovery of the body and the conducting of a normal funeral. In a clearly non-Stoic attitude, military members often risk their own lives to recover the bodies of fallen comrades so they might have proper burial ceremonies.

But if the recovery of bodies on a battlefield is not Stoic, the nature of military grief nevertheless has Stoic elements. Sherman argues that military personnel are more constrained in their grief owing to the Stoic stress on proper decorum. Too much grieving (especially too much crying by males and commanding officers) suggests personal weakness—an inappropriate response to loss. Thus, while soldiers cannot control the fact that a comrade has been killed, they can control their own response to loss. The Stoic mourner must change the outward response to a felt emotion. The notion of decorum (or "posing") changes the nature of mourning, often deferring its full psychological impacts. Thus mili-

tary culture rejects the classic Stoic position, yet requires individuals to adapt their responses to emotions in ways many Stoics would have approved.

The sources for the book rely heavily on the Stoics themselves, but they cover much more than just the ancients. Examples ranging from the classical period to the current war in Iraq argue the prevalence of Stoicism in at least the western military mind. The book includes interviews conducted with both British and American combat veterans, including former Vietnam POW and vice-presidential candidate James Stockdale, who shared his reliance on the words of Epictetus during his long period of captivity. It also draws on memoirs and other writings of combat veterans like Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves, and Anthony Swofford.<sup>1</sup> The inclusion of a number of fictional works from non-veterans<sup>2</sup> weakens the source base in this otherwise strong book; there is no need to turn to popular fiction when the wonderful writings of so many combat veterans are readily available.

This book is much more timely than its subject matter's base in ancient philosophy might imply. At its core, it shows how military personnel react to the grief and trauma that we, as a society, ask them to endure on our behalf. Understanding the Stoic legacies that underpin their reactions thus offers more than an enlightening link between ancient philosophy and modern military psychology. It gives us a fuller appreciation of what America's young men and women are enduring and how they are responding. The recent failures of the military medical system to deal with the psychological traumas of returning veterans<sup>3</sup> make this subject much more than an academic exercise. *Stoic Warriors* should therefore be of keen interest both to those in the military and to those seeking insight into the experience of military men and women.

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<sup>1</sup> Siegfried Sassoon, *Sherston's Progress* (London: Faber & Faber, 1936); Robert Graves, *Good-Bye to All That* (London: Cape, 1929); and Anthony Swofford, *Jarhead: A Marine's Chronicle of the Gulf War and Other Battles* (NY: Scribners, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> E.g., Pat Barker's three novels of World War I: *Regeneration*, *The Eye in the Door*, and *The Ghost Road* (NY: Dutton, 1992/1994/1995).

<sup>3</sup> Dan Frosch, "Fighting the Terror of Battles That Rage in Soldiers' Heads," *New York Times* (13 May 2007) <<http://tinyurl.com/yrasce>>; see also Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (NY: Scribners, 1995).