

BOOK DISCUSSION

Evaluating Emotions: What are the Prospects for a Stoic Revival?

Nancy Sherman, *Stoic Warriors: The Ancient Philosophy behind the Military Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005)

LAWRENCE LENGBEYER

Department of Leadership, Ethics & Law, United States Naval Academy, Annapolis, USA

Adverse, even dire events and circumstances are our inevitable lot in life as human beings, and we usually suffer mightily on their account. Some among us even become engaged in enterprises whose basic nature involves confronting such events and circumstances—in combat, for example, or the military more generally. But are the pains that we experience due to such adversities perhaps avoidable? Might it be possible to erect within our psyches an impenetrable barrier to suffering, or at least something approaching this? And would not such unassailability be among the greatest possible boons to humankind?

The Stoic philosophers of ancient Greece and Rome gave affirmative answers to these questions, arguing that a mental discipline of rational thinking could insulate us from the psychic storms that ordinarily accompany life's travails. In *Stoic Warriors*, however, Nancy Sherman develops a position that is skeptical regarding not only whether such invulnerable self-mastery is possible, but also whether it would even be advantageous, in particular for those who live the military life. Her book is a measured, but unrelenting, defense of certain 'negative' emotions that the Stoics would think us better rid of—most notably anger, fear, and grief, to which the three central chapters of the book are devoted. In Sherman's view, these emotions, at least when shorn of their excessive varieties, are salutary for psychological health, ethical conduct, and human community.

Asking present-day leaders, policymakers, and citizens to consider whether we might glean something of value from a neglected ancient tradition of practical philosophizing about how humans can best live and be is certainly a worthy project. *Stoic Warriors* is interesting, topical, and accessible, and the book deserves to find a place on many bedside tables. It is directed at a broad

Correspondence: Lawrence Lengbeyer, Department of Leadership, Ethics & Law, United States Naval Academy, 112 Cooper Road, Stop 7-B, Annapolis, MD 21402-5022, USA. Tel: +1 410 293 2114. E-mail: beyer@post.harvard.edu

public audience, rather than exclusively at philosophers (five of the six cover blurbs come from people who have made their names in military, diplomatic, or national security affairs), and the issues examined certainly deserve widespread engagement. The book is also a welcome indication that the American polity is finally leaving behind the post-Vietnam era of military invisibility, during which a generation of writers, thinkers, and highly educated citizens was so alienated from all things military that to them it was not only an irretrievably tainted enterprise—one deserving of mistrust, and a kind of national shame—but, worse, something not worthy of serious attention. That a set of institutions of such size, power, and national and world consequence can have been disregarded for so long is astounding. We can be grateful to Sherman and others who are giving the military long-overdue reconsideration and restoring it to its proper place in the public conversation.

Sherman aims to see just what Stoic ethical philosophy has to offer to military men and women. She neither rejects Stoicism as a hopelessly irrelevant or misguided relic, nor celebrates it faddishly and uncritically as the latest answer to every human-factor challenge faced by the military. In one chapter, “Sound Bodies and Sound Minds”, she offers a qualified endorsement of the Stoic view that cultivation of bodily fitness is proper so long as the effort is not invested with too much importance. In another, “Manners and Morals”, she calls upon ancient sources in arguing that the ethical conduct of our lives—especially lives lived in uniform—demands that we take care about appearances (comportment, demeanor, decorum), as a requirement for treating others with due respect and consideration. And in her closing chapter, “The Downsized Self”, Sherman praises the Stoics for contributing the world-changing idea of universal, cross-cultural shared citizenship grounded in bonds of reason and respect—an idea that deserves special attention from the citizens of a world superpower, particularly when foreign engagements bring them into contact with peoples who are otherwise quite unlike them.

But the overarching message in *Stoic Warriors*, especially in the core chapters on anger, fear, and grief, is that we—and military service members, in particular—need to resist the lure of strict Stoic doctrine more broadly. Yes, parts of Stoic philosophy are supportive of a humane, compassionate, empathic, communal, cosmopolitan form of military personhood, the form that Sherman advocates; but other aspects of Stoicism call for extreme versions of toughness, self-sufficiency, and emotional control that are, in her view, conducive to individual isolation, psychic damage, and excesses of violence. She is thus attempting to assemble “a gentler Stoicism” (105), “a brand of Stoicism that prepares us for enduring the worst tragedies without compromising our fundamental humanity” (104).

To understand Sherman’s critique, it is crucial to grasp the basic premise of Stoic psychology, which, to state the matter in its simplest terms, is that cognitions—judgments, beliefs, evaluations—give rise to, and are the foundations of, emotions. It then follows that if we can take control of the former, we might be able to shape the latter. If we think the right thoughts,

say the Stoics—thoughts that see reality clearly (for a change), and attend to the right realities at the right moments—then we will find ourselves having only a limited set of well-reasoned, mild, positive emotions. All other emotions, including the most common negative ones (such as anger, fear, grief, distress, frustration, annoyance, and bitterness) are products of mistaken conceptions of the world, and hence would disappear from an ideal Stoic community. As Sherman puts it, “The Stoics . . . demand that we cease to view emotions as events that merely happen to us. Though we may feel possessed by emotions, in truth we are the possessors, ultimately in charge of our experience” (80).

This is a fascinating, provocative challenge to our existing ways of understanding the human condition. Sherman, though, assails the proposal in two basic ways. First, she thinks its recommendations are psychologically unattainable. She cannot grant the possibility that Stoic methods might permit us to bypass entirely much of the emotion that we currently take for granted. What the Stoics promise is therefore merely “dissociation” from our emotional experiences and attachments, a kind of dulling or muffling of them, something that, to her eyes, looks a lot like “the numbness of traumatic dissociation” (164–166). Second, the Stoic mentality, even if achievable, would be undesirable. It would lead us to be too unkind and unsympathetic toward ourselves and others. We are fragile beings living fragile lives, and it is a mistake to aim at superhuman standards that do not acknowledge the non-rational sides of ourselves and our lives. To follow the Stoics strictly is to risk our humanity.

These objections are by and large reasonable and sensible, and expressed in clear, fluid prose. I expect that they will meet with a favorable reception (at least from the intelligentsia, though to her credit Sherman also has presented them to military audiences likely to be more ambivalent), because they nicely articulate current attitudes—or received wisdom—on these matters. Many readers will find it easy to nod their heads along with a work that is so good hearted, displays high regard for military personnel and traditions, commiserates with the injured and bereaved, and calls for compassion, empathy, and humanity.

The problem is that the case leveled against Stoicism may be unfounded, and we will not know one way or the other until someone—perhaps Sherman herself—thinks through the Stoic proposal more imaginatively than she does here, treating more seriously and open-mindedly the now-alien way of being that the Stoics urge upon us. A more confrontational, less ingratiating work, one that grants a more sympathetic hearing to the Stoics and skeptically distances itself from current thinking (dogma?), might find a harder road to acceptance among intellectuals, yet be ultimately more enlightening and useful.

Sherman concedes the basic Stoic insight that “modifications in evaluations make possible emotional changes” (128), but never satisfactorily explains why this principle could not ground a program of imbuing people with extensive invulnerability to certain negative emotions.

For instance, her best discussion of the Stoic techniques for self-mastery via altering of outlook occurs in the chapter on grief, where she lists five mental methods surveyed by Cicero for handling loss (144–146): (1) understanding that the loss is not a true evil; (2) dwelling on the good rather than the bad; (3) recognizing that such a loss is entirely to be expected given how the world works; (4) challenging one’s culturally-shaped presupposition that grieving is the appropriate response; and (5) remembering that many other people have endured such losses. Yet Sherman fails to take seriously the possibilities of psychological transformation that these seem to promise. First, she invokes Cicero’s dismissals of these methods on the grounds that it is too late to implement them once the loss has occurred. This is a fair enough point, and one directly relevant to Cicero, who had just lost a daughter in childbirth; but it says nothing to undercut the Stoic contention that making such mental habits second nature through long and repeated practice would remove the need for grieving when losses later arrive. In addition, Sherman seems to underestimate just what these techniques involve. Dwelling on the good, for instance, is not merely a matter of immediate attention, but a way of reorienting one’s outlook more generally. Reflecting upon what is to be expected in this life is not merely a matter of inoculating oneself against calamities by mechanically anticipating them beforehand, but really altering one’s conception of the nature of the universe and its operations. A similar point applies to reflecting upon how others have endured similar losses. And rethinking of cultural modes of response is an invitation not merely to alter one’s outward role performances, but to critique and repudiate certain ingrained ways of being and reacting, and to work at replacing them. All in all, Stoic prescriptions appear to have substantially greater transformative potential than Sherman acknowledges.

Consider her reply to the Stoic notion that all anger involves a needless and counterproductive loss of control due to irrational misconception and expectation. Sherman articulates the now-standard view (traceable at least as far back as the pre-Stoic Aristotle) that anger is sometimes justified and psychologically appropriate. She also relies upon the idea (especially prevalent in our age of celebrating and “validating” emotionality) that suppressing feelings of anger can “cause those feelings to fester and become twisted” into grimmer phenomena (71). More broadly, she suggests that attempting to eliminate certain emotions is hopeless and “unhealthy”, provoking greater maladies than it seeks to avoid (98). Moral indignation and outrage, in particular, help “restore ourselves or others from the injury that comes with being wrongly victimized” (78). “To feel outrage in bearing witness to torture, massacre, or rape is a fundamental response to human violation, and a fundamental way we protest” (89). Stoic “equanimity”, on the other hand—e.g., “to feel no . . . anger when one loses one’s limbs in a war one believes is unjust or to experience no moral outrage when one witnesses genocide”—“not only is hard to come by but undoes what we hold as our essential humanity” (82).

Unfortunately, Sherman never does compellingly *support* such claims on behalf of moral indignation and outrage. She asserts that personal and

communal restoration following the occurrence of wrongdoing *requires* anger, that “the absence of moral anger in the face of villainy or evil can . . . easily tear the social fabric” (85); but, while this position undoubtedly has *prima facie* intuitive appeal, the arguments for it are missing. She implies that the only alternative to anger at a violent aggressor is fear (84); that to forgo anger at wrongdoing is to condone, forgive, or tolerate it (85); that “seeking fair assessment and punishment” is a necessarily mild and inexpressive response (84–85); and that “decent-minded persons” cannot “protest violations of dignity on behalf of others” without deploying anger in doing so (85–86). Before we can fairly evaluate such questionable claims, further questions need to be addressed, such as: What exactly would occur in the Stoic mind as a replacement for our anger? Might it be possible to express stern condemnation, affirming our own (or others’) dignity and self-respect, without feeling anger? Is this really so beyond the pale of psychological possibility, or ethical appropriateness? Would (or does) it “not have the same expressive function” (85) as anger? Do not parents often cultivate such non-angry reactive tendencies to their children’s misdeeds? Could we not “do all we need to do morally” (92) without letting anger play a role? Sherman ought to grapple more thoroughly with the Stoics’ position, paying it the well-deserved tribute of deeply imagining her way into their outlook.

Just where is the line between unemotional intellection and emotional experience? Can we exercise our intellects in sincere, spirited, vigorous disapproval or censure, say, with our rational moral sensibilities and standards greatly affronted, yet not suffer anger or other emotions of the kinds Stoics seek to eliminate? Is intellectual passion for norms and principles necessarily emotional? Must all particularly positive or negative thoughts be accompanied by positive or negative emotion? Furthermore, can unemotional concern, attention, perception, reasoning, and judgment suffice for conducting effective and ethical practical encounters with the world? Or is there an indispensable receptivity that only emotions can provide? Can a merely rational commitment to standards and ideals suffice to motivate and guide behavior, including the self-sacrificing behavior needed in the military?

With regard to fear, Sherman’s approach is much the same: fear cannot be undermined or circumvented, only blunted or suppressed, and these responses are both psychically harmful and ethically risky. It is, she states, “hard to imagine the toughest among us” suddenly finding himself in immediate peril, about to trip a fragmentation grenade, say, yet being able to face this situation “without registering some fear” (118). But is it, really? It seems equally plausible that humans possess great under-developed, and under-explored, capacities for purely intellectual engagement, so that fear need not inevitably be triggered in such circumstances. And is it the case that *no* soldiers are, or have been, immune to battlefield fears, as Sherman suggests? If that is an exaggeration, then ought we not be studying the (small numbers of) fearless individuals, exploring whether their fortitude might be replicable in others? Sherman would answer in the negative, as she takes fear

to have irreplaceable practical value; but her brief look at the Stoic substitutes for conventional emotions fails to flesh them out to see how much of the useful work of ordinary emotionality they might do. Thus she too quickly concludes that “our own considered judgments of what good emotions involve” find them lacking (109).

When we come to the last two chapters of *Stoic Warriors*, on grief and social solidarity, the pertinent questions turn to the nature of our attachments to other people. Military service members need bonds of cohesion and solidarity in order to function effectively; they necessarily rely upon one another. Hence it is natural and fitting, according to Sherman, that they will experience grief at each others’ misfortunes: “developing an attachment to others brings with it a vulnerability to their loss” (133). But it is precisely this that the Stoics challenge. Is sorrow over losses inevitable, so that the most anyone can do is “conceal” it, as boys learn to do in our culture (136)? Or are the Stoics right that, with the right shift of mental attitude, we can undermine and avoid sorrows altogether without thereby sacrificing our humanity? Might it be possible to share love, friendship, and other personal bonds with other beings, yet hold certain beliefs or utilize certain patterns of thought that keep us from being vulnerable to grief when these others die or suffer? Would the nature of those bonds need to change somewhat and, if so, would the resulting relationships, though less familiar to us, necessarily be less conducive to human flourishing? Is Sherman right that true friendship demands a “sticky” and emotionally vulnerable psychological attachment or dependence (162) that the Stoics do not permit—or might Stoic friendship supply all that is needed after an immersion in Stoic thinking shrinks the needs themselves?

There are two distinctions, neither of which is maintained clearly in *Stoic Warriors*, that seem essential if we are to build upon Sherman’s work and make progress in resolving the difficult questions that we face. First is the difference between how Stoic persons would as *agents* pursue its positive program for managing their own minds, versus how they would as *observers* respond to others’ (and their own) less-than-successful efforts or non-efforts at self-mastery. Part of Sherman’s resistance to Stoicism derives from a presupposition, perhaps unfounded, that the embrace of its program entails an unforgiving critical attitude toward, and distance from, those who do not or cannot insulate themselves from psychic adversity. Much of the force of her argument actually derives from her numerous illustrative examples, which perhaps unintentionally play upon our reluctance to blame the victims of wrongdoing or other adversities for their consequent emotional traumas. The worry she exploits is that those who successfully adopt (parts of) the strict Stoic program will have little sympathy or patience for, or sensitivity to, their fellows. But the supposed entailment here, between Stoic work upon the self and ungenerous, insensitive callousness toward others, is surely suspect. Sherman points to no textual evidence that Stoics recommend chastisement or denigration of laggards, rather than, say, constructive and supportive encouragement. Indeed, it might be that a Stoic attitude is conducive to *less* harshness in judgment of self and others than is our current non-Stoic mode

of being.¹ The charge that “Stoicism can quickly become harsh” (40) seems unsupported—though it is certainly worthy of further exploration.

The second crucial distinction must be drawn between the adoption of the Stoic program by present-day, already-formed persons living in our decidedly non-Stoic culture, versus its adoption by as-yet unformed individuals or within a culture in which Stoicism is, if not the norm, then at least commonplace and the governing philosophy of certain subcultures. That the former might be hopeless pie in the sky says little about the prospects for the latter.

Sherman writes from the everyday standpoint of a normal, emotionally vulnerable Western adult. Her readers, likewise, may find themselves nodding in agreement as she dismisses Stoicism’s ambition for perfect escape from irrational emotionality. Yet it is premature to count out the Stoics on the basis of the lives that are currently familiar to us. For one thing, none of us knows what it would be like to be raised in a (sub)culture pervaded by the Stoic belief system (something that is surely not beyond the realm of possibility). And even in our own, very non- or even anti-Stoic culture, it seems that some children do on their own develop Stoic outlooks, with their restricted emotional ranges. We also find, as commonplace experience (including in the military), that certain kinds of thoughts are indeed useful in mollifying souls roiled by anger, fear, or grief. So it is not implausible that a more comprehensive integration of similar thoughts into our worldviews might have exponentially more power in short-circuiting negative emotions. Moreover, recent research in so-called positive psychology reveals some surprising, and Stoicism-supporting, facts about the human mind. For instance, the apparent existence of stable happiness “set-points” ought to make us cautious about asserting, as Sherman does (10), that horribly adverse events must ultimately compromise people’s chances for happiness. Finally, Sherman herself notes the Stoic foundations of cognitive behavioral therapy, a powerful tool of clinical psychology, but without examining its implications for Stoicism’s overall promise.

Stoic Warriors is an achievement that will enlighten many people and enrich public discourse concerning important issues. It makes plain the practical reasons that certain issues in moral psychology need to be addressed. And we can be grateful that it makes further research into the questions it raises more likely.

There is certainly no shortage of interesting questions that Sherman’s study provokes. Can we, for instance, pursue certain ends in life without becoming psychologically invested in and attached to their acquisition or retention? If we should try to grow into Stoic sages by obtaining new sets of beliefs (and perhaps images, too), will affirming such cognitive items before we are fully committed to them amount to self-deception? If so, is that a problem? Is all of Stoic training just a set of self-manipulative “mind games”?

The Stoic program, fascinating as it is, may ultimately prove to be unrealistic or unwise, and if so, Sherman will deserve credit for her early perceptiveness. But *Stoic Warriors*, though it effectively sketches the skeptical response to the Stoics, does not manage, and perhaps does not attempt, to

establish this case decisively. It opens, but does not conclude, a valuable conversation about what the Stoics have to say to us today.

Note

¹ See, in this regard, the discussion of Marcus Aurelius's Stoic views in chapter three of Shannon E. French's 2003 study, *The Code of the Warrior: Exploring Warrior Values, Past and Present* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003).