

PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

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Nemo Veritatem Regit

Nobody Governs Truth

Book Review

Nancy Sherman, *Afterwar: Healing the Moral Wounds of our Soldiers*, Oxford/NY: Oxford University Press, 2015. ISBN: 978-0-19-932527-6. 226 pages.

REVIEWED BY NANCY J. MATCHETT
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO/GREELEY, CO

Most Americans routinely thank veterans for their service nowadays, but it's worth remembering that this wasn't always the case. During the Vietnam era, for example, vets often came home to hostility and scorn. It's fairly easy to explain why that hostility was misplaced: many soldiers were just as frustrated by US policy as their civilian peers, and all military personnel show a remarkable willingness to put their own lives at risk for the sake of a wider nation. So it's a good thing that most people now seem to recognize this, and hence a good thing when we say "Thank you for your service" to veterans of—and participants in—the current wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. But are these expressions of gratitude good enough?

In *Afterwar*, Nancy Sherman explains why the answer is "no." It's not that she thinks we should have universal conscription—at least, she is "not prepared to make that case" (1). And it's not that she thinks civilian 'thank-yous' are insincere. In fact, she thinks they are a crucial part of the moral healing to which she hopes to contribute with this book. But Sherman understands why veterans often feel resentment when they hear those words. And she suspects that feeling is frequently justified, not only as a reminder of our shared responsibility in sending men and women to war, but as a way in which veterans hold civilians to account for the moral injuries many soldiers experience.

The concept of moral injury has been articulated in the psychological work of Jonathan Shay (1994; 2002) and Brett Litz (2009), and a primary emphasis in military contexts is to distinguish it from the more familiar notion of post-traumatic stress disorder. The difference is typically understood causally: whereas PTSD ultimately derives from other people's agency, moral injury is thought to derive from one's own choices and actions, specifically in response to situations where the "right" thing to do would be utterly immoral in any other context. In keeping with this trend, Sherman traces the concept's philosophical roots back to Bishop Butler's *Fifteen Sermons* (1726), while also drawing on her previous work on Aristotle (1991), Kant (1997) and the Stoics (2005; 2010) to explore how soldiers' conceptualizations of their wartime experiences can lead to an overwhelming sense of shame or guilt. But Sherman also draws on Greek tragedy to emphasize the ways in which soldiers are placed in circumstances where no action can be unequivocally identified as "right" (cf. Nussbaum 1986, 2000). The result is a much more complex and nuanced picture than has been presented in the military literature to date.

Each chapter begins with a real-world vignette, and these stories collectively illustrate the "variety of moral injuries suffered" as well as "the variety of repair" (10). Many include harrowing accounts of physical injuries too, such as those of as Captain Josh Mantz, who flat-lined for fifteen minutes after his femoral artery was severed during a sniper attack in Iraq, yet somehow managed to escape traumatic brain injury and resume his platoon command a mere five months later. It is tempting

to assume that anyone who survived such experiences would consider himself lucky to be alive, as well as to think it just obvious that Mantz's dedication to military service merits nothing but praise. Yet for Mantz, things are not that simple. "[I]t's the moral injury over time that really kills people," he says. "Soldiers lose their identity. They don't understand who they are anymore ... Most people don't appreciate the awful weight of that" (7).

Throughout the book, Sherman encourages us to feel that weight. In addition to the sense of alienation and isolation felt by Mantz, Sherman takes moral injuries to include:

- surging waves of resentment felt toward civilians who give little or no thought to the number of lives lost during war (Ch. 2)
- constant thoughts that one should have done more to protect the soldiers under one's command (Ch. 3)
- shame and a sense of moral betrayal felt in response to US treatment of an Iraqi civilian family who lost their father as "collateral damage" (Ch. 4)
- worries that reporting evidence of sexual harassment by one's peers is equivalent to betraying the military's cause and mission (Ch. 5)
- hounding guilt for being on legitimately earned leave during a time when fellow-soldiers were killed (Ch. 6)
- crippling self-doubt after being publicly reprimanded on trumped up charges that were later dropped (Ch. 7)

All of these cases involve "serious experiences of inner conflict" which arise when "*what one takes to be grievous moral transgressions ... overwhelm one's sense of goodness and humanity*" (8; *my emphasis*).

Much of the book is designed to show why this overwhelming experience is in fact reasonable—or at least understandable—once we acknowledge the role of moral emotions in human life. Following Strawson (1962), Sherman contends that such emotions are best understood as reactive attitudes constitutive of moral responsibility. This is partly due to the way in which they contain moral judgments: the emotion of gratitude, for example, is not just a warm feeling; it also contains a positive evaluation of another person's conduct in response to the fact that the other has benefitted oneself in some way. But the real significance of moral emotions stems from the ways in which they call self or other to account. Hence, it is reasonable for soldiers to refuse to treat civilian 'thank-you's as expressions of genuine gratitude unless there is evidence that the person uttering those words has some concrete awareness of the very real sacrifices the soldier has made on the civilian's behalf (absent such awareness, the utterance cannot express the judgment that the vet has done something truly admirable or praiseworthy). Moreover, it is justified for soldiers to treat civilian 'thank-you's as insincere unless there is some sense in which the person has also said "please," i.e., some acknowledgement by the person of his or her own shared responsibility, as a member of a democracy, in sending US soldiers to war, as well as some evidence that the person feels obligated to do something for the soldier in return.

Once it is understood as "a reactive anger grounded in a belief, thought or perception of being wrongly injured by another" (31), the resentment expressed by soldiers can be seen as an appropriate way for soldiers to hold all of us to account. For even though "civilians may not be liable

for the harms combatants face,” we are “nonetheless responsible to combatants for the harms they suffer in defending the nation” (38). But Sherman also worries that soldiers are often too hard on themselves. This is brought out in the story of Lao Panyagua (Ch. 3; cf. Ch. 7), who is gripped by moral anguish over the death of three soldiers under his command. Never mind that he could not have predicted the attack and did everything in his power to protect “his baby birds” (62). The fact remains that his best was not enough, and for that, he continues to hold himself to account.

Sherman contends that repairing moral injury is not simply a matter of changing beliefs. Although her earlier work explored the virtues of ancient stoicism for helping soldiers survive the ordeals of military life (2005), here she is more critical of the ways in which a kind of Stoic “sucking up” can lead soldiers to distance themselves from emotions that are essential to the formation of healthy human relationships (cf. 2010). On the battlefield, it is perfectly appropriate to turn off generalized feelings of compassion and trust toward anyone who is not a fellow-soldier, and it is risky even to care even about one’s fellow soldiers too deeply. But “that same indifference to life and death” which is psychologically helpful during deployment can manifest as “indifference to social connection” back at home (11).

Sherman is convinced that social connection is necessary to alleviate veterans’ moral wounds, and it also depends on moral emotions, including hope and trust as well as (genuine) gratitude. To trust others is to judge that they are willing—or at least able—to attend to one’s own needs and vulnerabilities, and to hold them to account for doing just that. Similarly, to place hope in others is to judge that they can contribute in some way to positive change for the self, as well as to ask that they do so. There is an important contrast here between moral emotions containing negative judgments and those containing more positive ones. For the former are typically based on specific beliefs about one’s own or another’s conduct or character (moral anguish and resentment, respectively), while trust is based on a more general “expectation of another’s genuine interest in your well-being or dignity,” and hope contains a “belief about how people ought to behave toward you” (109). Even the negative moral emotions invoke a sense of community, pointing out that we are all in this together despite the fact that one of us has let the other down, and asking for some kind of redress. But the more positive moral emotions are essential to moral healing since they convoke community, fixing our gaze on a common moral ideal, or at least on the mutual interdependency that stems from our common vulnerability as human beings.

Acknowledging this sort of vulnerability and (inter) dependence does not come easily for veterans who have been trained to protect others and take control of situations where human life is seriously threatened, but on Sherman’s account it is essential for soldiers to learn to accept that this is part of their nature too. She has been thinking about how best to facilitate moral healing since well before America’s current wars began. A philosophy professor at Georgetown University with a research background in psychoanalysis, she also served as the inaugural Distinguished Chair in Ethics at the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis from 1997-99. And though she has never counseled soldiers in an official capacity, her writing—which frequently draws on experiences from her own classrooms—is evidently motivated by a desire not just to understand soldiers’ experiences, but also to “make the moral terrain a little less murky” for them (21). Hence the book is ultimately “a manifesto for how to engage in moral repair, one-on-one, with individual service members and veterans so that we can begin to build a new kind of integrated community” (19).

The one-on-one engagement Sherman has in mind is less counselor-to-client than friend, family-member or fellow-citizen-to-soldier. Her overarching suggestion is twofold: veterans need opportunities to process the “hard-to-touch moral wounds of war” (4), and at the same time, to feel valued not just for their deeds on the battlefield but as ordinary human beings. Both require civilians to be very good listeners. And the latter can only be effected via “the subtle texture of individual engagements, in words and emotional tone and in body language and conduct, that convey our moral regard for each other and our responsibilities as members of a shared community” (39).

Despite her emphasis on everyday interactions, there are at least two possible lessons for philosophical practitioners. The first is that philosophy should be practiced with a dose of humility. Recalcitrant emotions such as Panygua’s are the stuff of Greek tragedy, and like Williams (1986), Sherman is reluctant to describe them as wholly irrational. After all, Lalo could have made different choices; he is right about that even if he is also mistaken to judge his actual choices so harshly. So changing his thinking will not quite be enough. What he needs is to feel differently about himself, and attempting to argue him out of those judgments, insofar as it suggests there is something wrong with his thinking, has the potential to make him feel worse.

This is connected to a second lesson, which is also the most philosophically original part of the book. Because she does not believe “that difficult conflicts and the emotions that express them are ever so completely resolved that all residue of such conflicts disappears” (101), Sherman is highly sympathetic to the benefits of non-judgmental or empathetic listening that is a hallmark of psychotherapy. (For example, she credits the enduring affection of Lalo’s wife Donna, who knows every harrowing detail of his wartime activities and has experienced many frightening manifestations of his PTSD, for Lalo’s slow but steady recovery.) But Sherman’s novel suggestion is that what people suffering from moral injury may need most is “self-empathy.” Like ordinary empathy, self-empathy would preserve the “tone and valence” of the soldier’s earlier traumatic experiences. And like other moral emotions, it calls out to the self with a normative expectation of response. But self-empathy shifts the judgment from blame for what the self was unable to do, to credit for what the self did do. More importantly, it allows the self to “reconstrue emotionally powerful and, in some cases, traumatic experiences,” and hence may lead to “a fairer and more equitable assessment of responsibility” (102).

Many books relevant to philosophical practice are especially keen to differentiate philosophical counseling from both counseling psychology and academic philosophy. Nancy Sherman does neither of these things. Instead she draws freely on from both traditions in an effort to capture the post-war experience of military veterans and figure out how civilians, as well as soldiers themselves, can best respond to their needs. The result is an interesting and worthwhile read.

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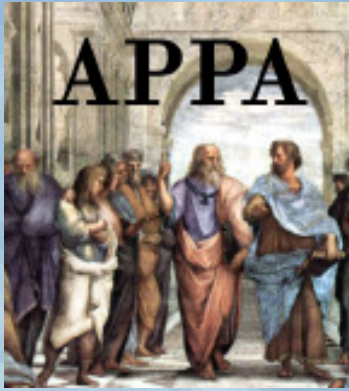
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Nancy J. Matchett is Associate Professor and Chair of Philosophy at the University of Northern Colorado. In addition to teaching both online and face-to-face courses in ethics, personal identity and moral psychology, she provides individual client counseling and ethics consulting services to both campus and community groups. She is currently researching the efficacy of philosophical practice for alleviating moral distress.

Correspondence: nancy.matchett@unco.edu





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Aims and Scope

Philosophical Practice is a scholarly, peer-reviewed journal dedicated to the growing field of applied philosophy. The journal covers substantive issues in the areas of client counseling, group facilitation, and organizational consulting. It provides a forum for discussing professional, ethical, legal, sociological, and political aspects of philosophical practice, as well as juxtapositions of philosophical practice with other professions. Articles may address theories or methodologies of philosophical practice; present or critique case-studies; assess developmental frameworks or research programs; and offer commentary on previous publications. The journal also has an active book review and correspondence section.

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