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Shielding Humanity: a New Approach to Military Honour

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Introduction

Why do military ethicists concern themselves with military honour? There are a variety of different reasons, but one major one is that honour – already at the heart of the military ethos – can be a force for good. If a code of honour consists in shaming those who act illegally, unethically, or viciously, then the fear of shame can serve as a powerful motivator against unethical conduct. However, some commentators are rightly hesitant to bridle honour, with all its accompanying passions: including pride, loyalty, and anger, amongst many others.

Another reason for our interest in military honour is that in some way, the honourable life must be connected to the flourishing life. A life lived honourably (in the “true” sense of the word) must be a life lived well. As Christopher Toner notes:

[T]here is no guarantee that military service is smoothly integrable into every sort of good life. But for those who take to it, who submit themselves to its standards of excellence and come to develop its virtues, and who reflect also on its place in their lives as including other commitments (say to family or religious community), the military ethic and the attendant character development can play just such a role.¹

The title of this paper ‘Shielding Humanity’ comes from Toner’s description of what he calls the “shield approach” to military ethics.² This approach, of which the two major contributors are Nancy Sherman & Shannon E. French, is primarily concerned with how to provide moral and psychological protection for soldiers from the things they are forced to do in war. It is an ethic concerned primarily with the effects of war on those who fight it; how it can harm them, change them, and prevent them from living a flourishing life.³

A comprehensive approach would consider the host of different challenges that war can pose to eudaimonia. However, his is beyond the scope of what I will be able to achieve here. However, this paper aims to begin that worthwhile project by exploring some of the strengths, weaknesses and differences between the approaches of Sherman and French. Finally, I will suggest a third approach which might fill some of the gaps, and answer some of the concerns that arise.

1: Nancy Sherman’s Neo-Stoicism

When Nancy Sherman began teaching future midshipmen at the US Naval Academy, Annapolis, she found that of all the philosophical systems presented to the students in her ethics classes, including Kant, Mill, and Aristotle, it was the Stoicism of Epictetus that most resonated with military men and women.⁴ “[W]hatsoever is good,” the Stoics held, “must benefit its possessor under all circumstances.”⁵ Goodness cannot be subject to luck of circumstance, or be external to the agent. Therefore, the Stoics held that only “characteristic excellences or virtues of human beings”⁶ qualify as genuine goods. Following from this is the Stoic claim that emotional responses – joy, sorrow, fear, anger, jealousy, pride – to external things are merely false
judgements about good and evil: if I feel anger because my enemy acts unjustly, then I have falsely believed that his actions somehow affect me in some morally significant way. In reality, the Stoics claim, only my own choices – be they virtuous or vicious – can be of moral significance to me. The person who recognises this and frees himself from emotional attachment attains a sage-like “indifference” to external factors.  

The Stoic claim that the sage should free himself of moral and emotional attachment to those things over which he has no control provides warriors with the assurance that, though the fog of war is often thick, their moral commitments extend only as far as their autonomy.  

Although Sherman deviates from Stoicism at many points (for instance, in arguing that grief is a morally good and appropriate emotion), it is in her approach to empathy that Sherman draws most upon Stoic beliefs. The only way to foster that respect, according to both the Stoics and Sherman, is by generating genuine empathy for other human beings “through exercises in imagination: to heighten empathy by becoming others for a moment, to trade places and become the victim”.  

Not only does empathy serve to develop the respect owed to all people, but it serves to temper other emotions like anger and vengeance by fostering respect for those at whom one is angry. Furthermore, kinship, camaraderie and loyalty are central concepts in the military ethos, and all of them require concern for more than one’s own soul; that is, an empathetic connection with others. For Sherman, empathy is the key to “loosening the Stoic armour.” Empathy and respect allow us to gauge whether our outwardly-directed emotions are accurate representations of events or false beliefs; whether our grief is legitimate, our anger righteous or our loyalty justified.  

Empathy also informs Sherman’s approach to military ethics education. Given that empathy (i) allows soldiers to gauge legitimate and illegitimate emotions; (ii) undergirds the respect owed to others; and, (iii) checks against base human desires like wrath against those who have killed a comrade, the fostering of empathy is a priority for military educators.  

Sherman’s focus on empathy as a means of generating respect is compelling as a means of preventing atrocities committed against noncombatants. Empathy – imagining what it would be like to be another person - aims at revealing to us the fundamental humanity of other people. Sherman argues that “we must imagine what it is like to be another with her distinctive temperaments and talents, in her situation and circumstances, living her life with her life choices.” One can see how this would be an effective means of preventing atrocities from being committed against the innocent, however, what happens when our imaginative experiment reveals a thoroughly corrupt, abusive character who has committed serious crimes against us? That is, will empathy serve as an effective deterrent from wrath and violence against one’s genuine enemies? The point here is not that empathy, if fostered, will be ineffective, but that soldiers may not be adequately equipped with the skills necessary to develop empathy for enemy combatants, especially if those combatants have killed a soldier’s comrades. In Homer’s epic, the Iliad, Achilles wrath against Hector is such that empathy seems impossible to him. Against Hector’s (reasonable) request that the victor of their combat return the slain body to his people, Achilles
reveals his inability to empathise with the man who has done the “unforgiveable” in killing his dear friend Patroclus.

Hector, stop!
You unforgiveable, you… don’t talk to me of pacts.
There are no binding oaths between men and lions –
Wolves and lambs can enjoy no meeting of the minds –
They are bent on hating each other to the death.\(^\text{12}\)

After successfully killing Hector, Achilles allows the Greek army to stab at his body before lacing his corpse to a chariot and dragging it around the city of Troy as Hector’s family look on. Not only does Achilles reject Hector’s request, but he does the exact opposite.

Furthermore, not all enemies are as honourable as Hector. Some soldiers, such as Amon Goeth, commandant of the Krakow-Plaszow concentration camp, who enjoyed shooting camp detainees for sport (as depicted by Ralph Fiennes in \textit{Schindler’s List}) appear increasingly barbaric and more deserving of brutal punishment the more one knows about what they are like. In such cases, placing oneself in the shoes of the other may not yield the kind of respect Sherman required; rather, it may simply confirm the warrior’s belief that the enemy is morally reprehensible. Empathy on such a scale such as this, which echoes the Christian sentiment to “love one’s neighbour” is saintly, and may be beyond the reach of many soldiers. Whilst Sherman is correct in arguing that empathy is a powerful shield against committing atrocities against noncombatants, it may be less effective in preventing such crimes against enemy combatants, particularly those who I know or have judged to be genuinely dishonourable and vicious, and therefore beyond empathy. Sherman’s Stoic account argues that empathy develops the type of respect that should be afforded unconditionally. However, if empathy reveals a person who appears to deserve death, rather than one who demands respect, it seems unlikely to guarantee the same assurances against the commission of atrocities as it does against noncombatants. Thus, we need to look further for effective shields against the commission of atrocities to supplement empathy in times when it becomes elusive.

2: Shannon E. French’s Codified Honour

The other major contribution to the shield approach can be found in Shannon E. French’s book \textit{The Code of the Warrior}. French, also writing whilst at Annapolis, argues that warrior cultures scattered throughout history and geography have developed “codes of honour” or “warrior codes”: a commonly held standard of what the ideal warrior does and does not do that bears normatively on each warrior within the culture.\(^\text{13}\) These normative bearings go well beyond the deontic requirements of the Law of Armed Conflict; rather, they entail \textit{what it is to be a warrior}. Warrior codes, French contends, ensure that morally upstanding and honourable conduct is intertwined with the warrior’s identity. French argues that the modern day warrior is also governed by a code which all warriors are expected to hold faithful to. She refers to an incident
in which a Marine refrains from killing a noncombatant after receiving the simple rebuke, “Marines don’t do that.”

“Marines don’t do that” is not merely shorthand for “Marines don’t shoot unarmed civilians; Marines don’t rape women; Marines don’t leave Marines behind; Marines don’t despoil corpses,” even though those firm injunctions and many others are part of what we might call the Marines’ Code. What Marines internalize when they are indoctrinated into the culture of the Corps is an amalgam of specific regulations, general concepts (e.g. honor, courage, commitment, discipline, loyalty, teamwork), history and tradition that adds up to a coherent sense of what it is to be a Marine.14

The warrior code ensures that honourable, chivalrous, and virtuous conduct is an intrinsic aspect of what is means to be a warrior. If “war is hell,” and it so often is, warriors are asked to walk through hell without becoming demons. A central part of the warrior code – perhaps the primary purpose of that code – is to prevent warriors from becoming mere murderers. The reason for French’s interest in atrocity prevention is not only because they entail horrific abuses to the innocent, but also because in committing them, warriors begin to erode their own humanity. “A warrior’s humanity is most obviously at risk when he or she participates in an atrocity. Vile actions such as rape, the intentional slaughter of civilians, or the torture of prisoners of war dehumanize the victims and degrade the perpetrators.”15

The warrior code serves as a mechanism against the commission of atrocities because it is determined by warriors from within the warrior culture in question, and therefore shames, ostracises, and disincentives the commission of atrocities. The internal development and regulation of the code is a key feature of French’s approach: “[t]he code is not imposed from the outside. The warriors themselves police strict adherence to these standards, with violators being shamed, ostracized, or even killed by their peers.”16

However, French’s approach places a huge burden on the capacities of those within a warrior culture to be morally reflective and intuitive. Internal development, regulation and enforcement of a warrior code risks the development of a breed of warrior whose only concern is justifying himself to his peers. Although this may be effective when those peers are possessive of moral virtues which they impose on fellow warriors, a different peer group may have values that differ from those “imposed […] by some external source (such as a fearful civilian population).”17 In a conflict between the warrior code and externally imposed laws, which should trump the other? Or, more importantly, even if external laws do trump, why, if the warrior code is concerned with how one’s peers will evaluate an action, would any warrior be interested in the evaluations of those outside their peer group?

Achilles, our archetypal perpetrator of atrocity, is described by the god Apollo as having “no shame.”18 Military psychiatrist Johnathan Shay describes Achilles as experiencing a “shrinking of the social moral and horizon,” which Shay argues was a contributing factor in the commission of atrocities in the Vietnam War.19 The first stage of that shrinkage is to ignore those with whom
one has no personal relationship: those not his immediate comrades. However, Achilles’ horizon shrinks so small that nobody is able to shame him out of killing prisoners or desecrating Hector’s body. Achilles enters what Shay calls the “berserk state,” “in which abuse after abuse is committed.”\(^{20}\) In the berserk state, the berserker feels (amongst other things) “cut off from all human community.”\(^{21}\) In such a scenario, warrior shame seems ineffective as a preventative measure. Shay observes five instances of the berserk state in the *Iliad*, none of which are checked by interventions by fellow warriors. Three are checked by self-preservation (Agamemnon, Hector, and Patroclus), whilst another two (Diomedes and Achilles) are checked by interventions by non-warriors, and it is these latter two to which I now turn.

Shay suggests that the warrior in the berserk state experiences a profound shrinking of the moral and social horizon. However, he does not seem cut off from *all* human community; deep-seated relationships appear to remain. Particularly those which connect soldiers to their families and homes. Diomedes, one of the Greeks’ greatest heroes, is snapped out of his berserk state when he meets Glaucus, a Trojan warrior who challenges him to combat. Glaucus tells Diomedes of his ancestry, at which point Diomedes realises that his grandfather and Glaucus’ grandfather were friends, and thus declares them “sworn friends from our fathers’ days till now.”\(^{22}\) Achilles too is snapped from his berserk states by thoughts of home. When Priam visits him to beg for the body of Hector to be returned, he implores Achilles, “remember your own father! I deserve more pity… I have endured what no one on earth has ever done before – I put to my lips the hands of the man who killed my son.”\(^{23}\) This pitiful act and imploration “stir[s] within Achilles a deep desire to grieve for his own father”,\(^{24}\) and he weeps. Not for Patroclus, not for his soul or for Hector, but for the shame of having chosen the warrior life, and thus giving “no care” to his father in his old age.\(^{25}\) Here appears to be a compelling argument for consistent reminders of home during war: they appear to be an effective preventive from the commission of atrocities and the breaking of the berserk state from which so many atrocities are committed.

3: Remembering the Home Front

*By profession, I am a soldier and take pride in that fact.*

*But I am prouder, infinitely prouder, to be a father.*\(^{26}\)

It is prudent to ask whether the warrior class is *always* a morally competent cohort from which to think that a morally acceptable warrior code might emerge. That is, whether *a priori* we would be wise to trust warrior communities to internally develop their own codes of honour.

For example, in discussing the Samurai code known as Bushido, French touches on the controversial self-disembowelment practice known as *seppuku*. The Bushido code allowed Samurai to perform the ritualistic suicide in order to restore honour in the face of some disgrace (which may be, as French notes, “anything from an overt act of cowardice in combat to a trivial […] breach of etiquette at a formal dinner”).\(^{27}\) She concedes that “there is at least a pragmatic flaw in a system that could lead a warrior culture’s most courageous and committed members to
make the ultimate sacrifice to save, not land or lives, but face.” The flaw deepens when it is realised that samurai would often be pressured through fear of shame or ostracism to perform the rite. In the shaming of those who did not “opt in” to the commission of seppuku, we see that seppuku’s availability as an honourable practice made it the expected course of action. What is honourable becomes normatively prescriptive.

The example of seppuku can be used to emphasise a point which I believe to be pivotal to explorations of honour in the military: when warriors are only concerned with achieving the type of esteem valued by their peers, the ability of the broader society to influence military practice is undermined. For instance, when a specific form of seppuku, junshi – whereby vassals of a samurai would follow him into death by committing seppuku out of fealty – was outlawed, the practice continued amongst warriors despite extremely harsh penalties. When Okudaira Tadamasa (a 17th century samurai) died, one of his vassals followed him in junshi, which was outlawed at the time. In response, the vassal’s children were executed and his remaining family exiled. This vassal clearly felt that his commitments to the military and the warrior code greatly outweighed his commitments to his family. It seems as though some warrior codes can become insensitive to morally significant factors outside of the warrior culture.

This, to my mind, is the flaw of internally developed warrior codes; in reality, one’s status, commitments, and normative demands as a warrior do not outweigh one’s moral obligations as a father, husband, mother, or wife. This conception is captured the remark attributed to General Douglas MacArthur at the beginning of this section. Thus, warrior codes would be well-served in expanding their standards to incorporate what would be considered shameful in other walks of life, not only in a military context.

Such is the case in Shakespeare’s play, Coriolanus. In the play, Caius Marcius, a great Roman general is awarded the title ‘Coriolanus’ for his military exploits against Rome’s enemies, the Volsci, in taking the city of Corioles. His mother, Volumnia, with whom Coriolanus is very close, encourages him to stand for election as consul. Although initially successful, eventually Coriolanus’ disdain for the mob and scepticism about the merits of democracy loses him the support of the people and he is exiled from Rome. He joins with his mortal enemy Aufidius, the Volscian general, and swears revenge against Rome. Together, Coriolanus and Aufidius lay siege to Rome, which looks certain to fall. Coriolanus ignores the pleas of Roman senators to lift the siege, disowning his past identity as a Roman.

Wife, mother, child, I know not. My affairs
Are servanted to others. Though I owe
My revent properly, my remission lies
In Volscian breasts.

The pleas of the Senate having fallen on deaf ears, Coriolanus is visited by those he “knows not”: his wife, mother, and son. His mother, Volumnia, implores him to consider what effect “making the mother, wife, and child […] see the son, the husband and the father tearing his country’s
Shielding Humanity: A New Approach to Military Honour

bowels out”\(^{31}\) might have on them. Volumnia appeals beyond Corolianus’ sense of warrior pride, which demands vengeance. She shows how bartering a peace agreement between Rome and the Volsci will not only uphold his honour as a warrior, but as a Roman, a son, a husband, and a father. Finally, mother, wife and son all kneel before Coriolanus, and “shame him with their knees.”\(^{32}\)

Here, Coriolanus, like Achilles before Priam, breaks into tears, noting that “it is no little thing to make mine eyes to sweat compassion.”\(^{33}\) He concedes, agreeing to broker a peace between Rome and the Volsci, but not before ensuring that doing so will be accepted by his fellow warriors. He turns to Aufidius and asks “were you in my stead would you have heard a mother less, or granted less?”\(^{34}\) Although Coriolanus is swayed from vengeance by his mother, he also seeks the validation of his warrior peers. What he seeks is a route through which he can fulfil what it means to be a good warrior alongside what it means to be a good son, husband, father, and Roman. Being one at the cost of the other is – as his mother shows him – insufficient.

When Coriolanus first lays eyes on his wife when he returns to Rome at the head of the Volsci army, he informs her that “these eyes are not the same I wore in Rome.”\(^{35}\) The loving eyes of Caius Marcius have been replaced by the vengeful gaze of Coriolanus. But Coriolanus and Caius are the same man: whilst he tries to forget who he was before his vengeance, his identity is bound up as much in his family as it is in the warrior code. The Marine who abstained from killing a noncombatant on the basis that “Marines don’t do that” was sharply reminded of what it is to be a Marine, however, he may equally have been persuaded by the rebuke “what would your children think?” Soldiers often take their wars home with them, but they also take their homes to war. Civilian identities can do as much to remind a warrior of what is honourable as can any warrior code.

5. Conclusions

I have looked at the “shield approaches” presented by both Nancy Sherman and Shannon French, suggesting ways in which each responds successfully to specific problems that warriors may face in war. Sherman’s focus on empathy provides a way of ensuring that warriors are they type of people who will avoid committing atrocities against noncombatants, whilst French’s warrior code encourages warriors to see morally upstanding conduct as being an intrinsic aspect of their identity. However, both approaches are – I suggest – limited due to their foci. Sherman’s empathy, for instance, will prove effective in restraining soldiers from harming the innocent, but is unlikely to restrain soldiers against those who are legitimate targets, for whom it is unclear if empathy is due. Furthermore, it is unclear how possible it will be for the modern military establishment to inculcate empathy into warriors (this is not impossible, it just remains to be seen how it might be done).

French’s approach relies on the specific code to which a warrior sees himself as bound being a morally good one, which in turn is reliant on the upstanding moral character of the warriors of the past; warriors who, until recently, had very little exposure or training in morality. French also stipulates a warrior code developed and maintained by powers internal to the warrior caste (from within the same honour world, as Appiah might say). This means that the warrior code
might be internalised by warriors in a way that external developed rules might not be, but also makes cultural reform difficult when (or if) a warrior code becomes corrupt. Furthermore, most warriors hold moral commitments in a variety of different moral domains, most pertinently in this case, at war and at home. Thus, what it means to be a warrior must be consistent with what it means to be a father, brother, mother, sister, and so on.

Bringing civilian values and roles to bear on the development and enforcement of warrior codes is one way of ensuring that warriors are able to maintain their commitments in the various honor worlds in which they abide. This is especially pertinent in cases where the “warriors” – including drone pilots and cyber warriors – are no longer fighting in a theatre of war, but might traverse the honor worlds of warrior and family member in the same day. In these cases, empathy – which Sherman prizes so highly - becomes one of many values that traverses different honor worlds. Fathers and warriors both need to be empathetic, and one is honoured for being empathetic. However, one is also honoured for issuing punishment where necessary, on one’s children or the enemy; on obeying laws that bear on them, whether road traffic laws or laws of armed conflict; for being slow to anger, but showing anger when appropriate, and so on. This approach emphasises the moral virtues instead of focussing on particular values which might be limited to a particular honour world.

2 Toner, in turn, borrows the term from Shannon French, who firsts uses the term “shield” to describe her approach to military ethics. C.f. The Code of the Warrior, p. 242
3 Toner, ibid., pp. 185-186
4 Nancy Sherman, Stoic Warriors: The Ancient Philosophy Behind the Military Mind, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2005, p. 2
7 Sherman, Stoic Warriors, p. 3
8 Sherman, Stoic Warriors, p. 133
9 Sherman, Stoic Warriors, p. 177; C.f. ‘Educating the Stoic Warrior’, pp. 111-112.
10 Sherman, Stoic Warriors, p. 171
11 Sherman, ‘Educating the Stoic Warrior’, pp. 112-113
13 French, The Code of the Warrior, p. 3
15 French, ‘Sergeant Davis’ Stern Charge’, pp. 121-122
16 French, The Code of the Warrior, p. 3
18 The Iliad, Book 24, 52
20 Shay, Achilles in Vietnam, p. 77
21 Shay, Achilles in Vietnam, p. 86
22 Iliad, Bk. 6, 277
23 Iliad, Bk. 24, 588-591
24 Iliad, Bk. 24, 592-593
25 Iliad, Bk. 24, 631
26 This is an unsourced quote widely attributed to General Douglas MacArthur.
27 French, The Code of the Warrior, p. 221
28 French, The Code of the Warrior, p. 224
30 William Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*, Act 5, Scene 2, 82-85
31 *Coriolanus*, Act 5, Scene 3, 102-104
32 *Coriolanus*, Act 5, Scene 3, 170
33 *Coriolanus*, Act 5, Scene 3, 196-197
34 *Coriolanus*, Act 5, Scene 3, 192-193
35 William Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*, Act 5, Scene 3, 37