Foto Julia Sabugos

*Nancy Sherman*

**An interview with Nancy Sherman**

# Moral injury
## is part of the human condition

At the end of October, ARQ National Psychotrauma Centre in the Netherlands organized two expert meetings about moral injury. Moral injury is a relatively new concept that refers to the moral suffering that may be felt by perpetrators, witnesses and victims of moral harms. Keynote speaker at the meetings was Nancy Sherman, Professor of Philosophy at Georgetown University and author of many books and papers on the moral aspects of warfare, including *Stoic Warriors*, *The Untold War* and *Afterwar*. Jackie June ter Heide talked to a wise person and inspiring academic.

*Jackie June ter Heide*

*Clinical psychologist and theologian. She works as a therapist and senior researcher at ARQ Centrum'45.*
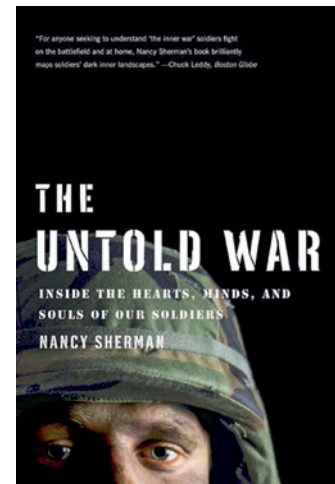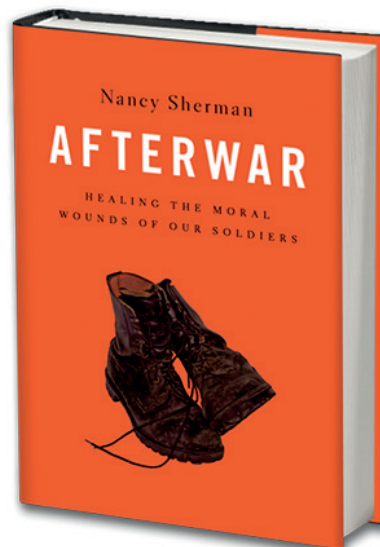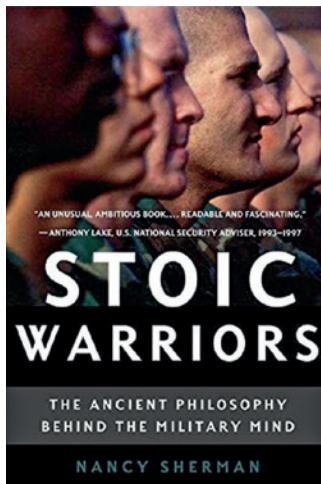
**How did you end up in the field of moral injury?**

About two decades ago, I was teaching at the US Naval Academy. Among my students were officers who had just returned from the first Gulf war. They were interested in Stoicism, popularized as the idea of being very tough and sucking it up. They were not very keen to talk about difficulties or moral dilemmas. We occasionally invited guest lecturers. One of them was James Stockdale, who was held as a prisoner of war at the Hanoi Hilton in North Vietnam for more than seven years, two of which in solitary confinement. He suffered a lot during his captivity, he was always worried about being strong enough to endure the torture, and when he finally broke, he was ashamed. That is how I began to understand something about the moral conflict individuals in war face.

As a philosopher, I already worked on Stoicism and moral emotions. Around the time I was writing my third book, *Afterwar,* the United States were right in the middle of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Some of the Georgetown students fought in that war and had seen their buddies die. They were beginning to wonder about the cause of the war: was it just, was it worth it? They felt they hadn't done enough, even if they did everything they could. It wasn't so much post-traumatic stress that affected them; they were worried about the moral conflicts.

**PTSD is generally considered a personal, individual problem, while moral injury refers to suffering from the suffering of others.**

Moral injury, in particular within the military, is very much about responsibility, and that is philosophically relevant. Philosophers are concerned with emotions that constitute and express moral accountability: shame, guilt, resentment, indignation. In my experience, service men and women have a heightened sense of moral responsibility. It is often assumed that they are callous or intent on killing, but that's not been my experience at all. They are committed to service and taking care of people. Part of their anguish comes from taking on too much responsibility, even for events that are often just accidents.

Some of them are amoral, of course. Take Mȳ Lai in North-Vietnam, where hundreds of civilians - women, children, unarmed men - were killed by American officers. My first book on the moral psychology of soldiering, *Stoic Warriors*, includes an extensive interview with Hugh Thompson, the helicopter pilot who circled above the area and eventually stopped the massacre. What I mean to say is: it is true that atrocities are committed, and there are people who don't suffer moral injury when they perpetrate these atrocities. But the people who see it or who didn't stop it, often carry the moral burden of the perpetrator.

**What is your work as a philosopher like? When you mention 'doing research', what does that entail?**
I am not sure how to categorize what I do. As a philosopher, I have always been interested in moral psychology: emotions, motivation, what counts as thriving or flourishing, relationships and attachment. I meet a lot of veteran service members in the course of my work. Sometimes, they come into my classroom and we talk about topics like civilian casualties or the use of a human shield. And in some cases, they want to talk further. That's when I ask them to tell me about some incidents that have been tricky or tough for them. They then sign an agreement allowing me to include their story in a book. That's how it was with *Afterwar*.

Let me give you an example: one of my students was Tom Fiebrandt, who had been deployed to Iraq. He came to my office and said: 'My wife didn't think I should take this course, because it would bring up too many bad memories.' But then he started talking after all, about an incident that had really gotten to him.

He served in the Army cavalry as a scout. He had already been exposed to a lot of fighting, and his supervisor said: it's time for some 'rest and relaxation' (R&R); spend some time by the pool. While he was there, he received word that an armored vehicle with his buddies on board had been under fire and five people had been killed, one of them his best friend. He knew the street where it happened like the back of his hand, and he knew that street should have been avoided because it was far too dangerous. He said: 'I should never have let them go there, I failed. I was devastated.'

I asked him if he ever spoke about this with anyone. He said: 'With my brother.' When he was on leave, he sat on the porch with his brother, drank some beer, and thought about whether he wanted to re-enlist. That's when he realized that it was impossible to keep track of all of the changes and dangers back in Iraq. He said: 'In fact, my role is very limited.' It was like he had an epiphany when he said that. He contextualized the incident in a way that helped to lift the burden of responsibility.

I am not a therapist, or a clinician, but there are some philosophical concepts that can certainly help: degree of responsibility, guilt, innocence, negligence, commission and omission.

**You are inspired by Stoicism. In the Netherlands, Stoicism has a slightly negative image, since it is associated with 'not feeling'. Why do you think Stoicism is relevant and helpful for people who are morally injured?**
I was skeptical about Stoicism at first, too. Stoicism is often reduced to 'sucking it up and trucking on'. Service men and women often find it very attractive as a way to deal with deprivation and hardships. I wanted to explore whether there was a gentler and more nuanced form of stoicism without those psychologically unhealthy aspects.

The Stoics have more to teach us than we sometimes think, especially about how you can lose your balance as a result of sticky 'acquisitive attachments'. For example, when you are so attached to your phone that you become very upset when it falls and shatters. Or when you attach too much value to the medals and honors that are often only awarded when you come from the right background or have exactly the right career credentials.. The Stoic idea is that you need to rely on your own virtue and reasoned judgment more than on luck or external factors that can unbalance you. That's a good thing, particularly in the midst of a war. Service members have to let go of a lot in order to do their work. In that context, it can be useful to try to minimize losses, to minimize your attachment to material or external matters that have little to do with your intrinsic 'goodness' or virtue.

Of course, that is a lot more difficult when it concerns the loss of people you love. If you want to be stoic about that, you could say that it is unhealthy to mourn someone for such a long time that you lose yourself completely. Yes, it is healthy to grieve, but it is also healthy to realize that there are other people out there who can help and be part of your greater circle, and that the memories will always stay with you. In my own life, I have to shrink down my worry about my kids. Otherwise, I'll go crazy!

**You write about moral trauma among service members. Do you think that the concept is also relevant outside the military context?**
Yes, the risk of moral injury is part of the human condition. It applies to victims of sexual and domestic violence, but also to public service providers such as the police, fire workers or humanitarian aid workers. And to whistleblowers, who represent a system that is corrupt and contrary to their conscience. And to people who witness traumatic events. Perpetrator, victim, bystander - sometimes these three roles blend in one individual.

Many people face moral conflicts or dilemmas, or morally stressful situations.

**In *Afterwar* you write a lot about empathy and self-empathy. Could you elaborate on that?**

The idea came to me that many people who blame and punish themselves, don't see themselves in the benevolent way others see them, that is to say: as not culpable. Their guilt is subjective and has nothing to do with objective wrong-doing. I don't want to dismiss or make light of their feelings - I understand that they feel this very strongly. But it would be good if they could be more compassionate and understanding towards themselves. Self-empathy could be a way of feeling compassion for yourself while still feeling the pain of others, without becoming blended with others. It's a kind of self-comfort that comes from understanding what happened, contextualizing it, and being able to think: maybe I wasn't so guilty, I wasn't so horrible in what I did after all.

**What do you think is needed to become empathetic towards oneself?**

It certainly helps to talk to a sympathetic person, in real life or in your imagination, who can help you to see the sides of the story that you are unable to see because of your punishing judgement. This could be a sympathetic listener, or an imaginary person to whom you write a letter. For example, a letter in which you describe what you did, what you think of that now, and what steps you have taken to forgive yourself or atone. Or you could ask that person to forgive you - if it is a victim, or the relative of a victim, for instance. This enables you to broaden your perspective and see things in a different light.

**What do you hope to achieve with your work?**

Several things. First of all, I hope to break down barriers between service members and non-service members, especially in the United States but globally, as in here, in the Netherlands. Secondly, to allow conversation about psychological suffering: to talk more openly about moral injury, moral conflicts and morally harmful events. So non-clinicians can be more psychologically minded about it. I would love to be influential in destigmatizing mental health treatment. On an intellectual and philosophical level, I think it's always good to break down academic walls. There are high walls in universities. It is hard to get outside your discipline, but your work stands to become much more cogent and meaningful when your ideas can cross-pollinate with those from other disciplines.