

Book Review for *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*. Sherman, Nancy. *Afterwar*.
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Over two and a half million U.S. soldiers are coming home. Upon return from Afghanistan and Iraq — which hold the unfortunate distinction as being among the longest wars in U.S. history — many will carry the so-called signature injuries of these conflicts: the invisible wounds of psychological and moral injury many sustained while fighting. The simplicity of this fact betrays its moral complexities, and it is these complexities that Nancy Sherman takes as her point of departure in her newest book “Afterwar”.

“Afterwar” is a lucid and engaging book; throughout, Sherman explores the relationship between U.S. soldiers’ personal experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq and moral injury.¹ Moral injury is a concept that is literally ancient; it can be understood in contemporary language as “experiences of serious inner conflict arising from what one takes to be grievous moral transgressions that can overwhelm one’s sense of goodness and humanity” (8). The book delivers a significant contribution to the growing philosophical literature on moral injury and military service.

Readers familiar with Sherman’s previous work will recognize that “Afterwar” extends her corpus in military ethics. In addition to her numerous articles in this area of philosophy, we can also count an impressive three books published in less than a decade. In the oldest of these books, “Stoic Warriors,” Sherman demonstrates convincingly the relationship between Stoicism and military dispositions toward toughness and grit — an obvious springboard that Sherman uses to further tease out the implications of war on the warrior. While “Afterwar” continues Sherman’s scholarship on the psychological dimensions of war the book is most closely aligned with its more recent predecessor, “The Untold War”, both “books share the fact that they explore the moral and psychological wounds servicemen and women face as they come home. In this sense, the books are fellow travelers, offering complimentary scholarly contributions to questions involving moral injury and *jus post bellum*, while remaining sufficiently distinct in their content and scope that they stand alone.

The organization of “Afterwar” helps advance the book’s overarching aim of “understanding the one-on-one obligations and expectations that are part of bringing soldiers home”(39), part of what Sherman calls “constructive moral engagement” (4). In service of this aim the book explicates and analyzes the moral injuries soldiers face, outlines what should be done about repairing these injuries when soldiers return or prepare to return home, and articulates the obligations of individual citizens to help ensure that this repair is carried out.

Each of the book’s chapters center on the experiences of men and women *in* war, and the struggles, triumphs, and failures they face *after* war. These very personal accounts of servicemen and women, and their friends and families, are taken from in-depth interviews Sherman has conducted. This is one of the book’s greatest organizational and substantive strengths. Without these accounts, it would be difficult to capture the depth of moral injury from which so many soldiers suffer, and the moral response these injuries may require from ordinary citizens.

¹ The term “soldier” is used in a generic capacity here to include soldiers, marines, sailors, and airmen and women.

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The book shows repeatedly and convincingly how servicemen and women often have immense feelings of guilt, resentment, betrayal, and shame resulting from their combat service. One of the most powerful of these accounts comes from the pseudonymous “Sally”. During her Air Force deployment to Iraq, Sally was harassed repeatedly by her male comrades in arms, and then subsequently failed by her (male) superior officers who neglected to adequately address the problem. Sally states that she “felt like a deer in hunting season;” things got so bad that she even began carrying a knife to the chow hall (105). Sherman uses narratives like Sally’s to illuminate such issues as systemic bias, sexism, and sexual assault in the military, and the consequent moral injuries they produce. The book intertwines these themes with discussions of philosophical inquiry into concepts like trust and hope. The effect is a rich and nuanced philosophical discussion, with important practical considerations, catalyzed by highly personal accounts of moral injury.

Consequently, the book threads complex philosophical concepts and issues throughout the text in a way that is intelligible to a lay reader without training in philosophy, yet nuanced enough to capture important philosophical insights. This approach generally strikes the right balance, but may leave more philosophically oriented readers wondering, at times, if Sherman could not have presented a more rigorous defense of some of the philosophical conclusions she makes.

Although these instances in the text are rare, perhaps the most obvious case is in Sherman’s discussion of the obligations owed by citizens to soldiers. In the discussion of civilian obligation, Sherman argues in favor of “the moral necessity for each of us to be personally engaged in the largest reintegration of American service members into civilian society since Vietnam” (1). Identifying this necessity, Sherman articulates her vision of personal obligation 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). This obligation, Sherman contends, is the appropriate response to the call for engaging in the steps required to begin the moral healing so needed for those service members suffering from moral injury.

The obvious question concerns the source and grounding of this “sacred obligation to those who serve” (40). Unfortunately, the book fails to provide an adequate answer. In its attempt to do so, the book takes a short detour through contemporary revisionist just war theory in order to familiarize the reader with some of the philosophical issues that arise in trying to ground *post bellum* obligations, of the sort that Sherman favors, by ascribing shared moral responsibility. The connection is a plausible one: recent revisionist work has addressed questions related to non-combatants’ contributions to or support of a war as a way to ground responsibilities, liabilities, and obligations with respect to *ad bellum* and *in bello*. If civilians hold some responsibility for why and how combatants fight, then maybe they also have some *post bellum* obligations. But Sherman is skeptical of rooting civilians’ *post bellum* responsibility, at least for the kind of moral engagement she prescribes, in one’s causal or contributory responsibility for a war. She notes that cashing out such individual responsibility is extremely difficult, especially in light of epistemic factors that may keep civilians from possessing necessary and appropriate knowledge about the facts and circumstances of particular wars (38). Given this likelihood, many soldiers and civilians alike will be morally excused, and in some cases fully excused, rendering them not responsible and

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free from some moral obligations related to the war that may accrue in the absence of excusal. Of course, there are those civilians who may possess adequate knowledge about the war — the paradigm case is the well informed and enthusiastic war supporter or the jailed pacifist war resister. But as Sherman notes, pinning obligation for moral engagement at the level of the individual is too elusive to adequately capture “the real nature of owning and accepting shared moral responsibility in a country’s collective projects” (39).

As an alternative to *post bellum* obligations flowing from one’s contribution to a war, Sherman turns to the possibility that group membership *qua* shared nation-state citizenship may be sufficient to ground *post bellum* obligations for individual constructive moral engagement with soldiers and veterans. The problem is that Sherman does not really tell the reader how this might be so (39). In the end, Sherman makes perspicuously clear that she will “leave it to others to develop that philosophical argument” (39). But this causes one to wonder why the book does not more fully develop the justification for the philosophical argument upon which many of the book’s philosophical conclusions are predicated. This may ultimately leave some readers unconvinced of Sherman’s assertion that citizens have robust obligations to engage in constructive moral engagement with servicewomen and men as they return home. This does not mean that Sherman’s argument is incorrect, but simply that it is in need of more development and defense.

The shortcomings of “Afterwar” are minor. On balance the book presents a fresh perspective on moral injury and how individuals can and should contribute to the healing and repair that so many soldiers need. By interlacing stories from the ancient world with those of the new, Sherman brings to light the fact that moral injury has been experienced since antiquity. The book underscores the fact that these injuries are a constitutive part of the human experience in war, and in light of this observation, the central task becomes grappling with how we are to understand and address moral injury. While the book focuses on the experience and injuries of American soldiers, it is clear that it speaks to a global audience who, if history is any guide, will long remain in need of books like “Afterwar”.