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Epictetus vs. Aristotle

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EPICTETUS VS. ARISTOTLE

What Is the Best Way to Frame the Military Virtues?

Mark N. Jensen

The virtue theoretic approach to ethics locates moral value primarily in the character of the agent rather than in the rules governing an act or the consequences that follow from it. Concerns about the character of the agent long have been a central preoccupation of military organizations. To be sure, modern military organizations in the United States and other Western, liberal, democratic states pay close attention to the rules governing acts and the consequences of these acts. Nevertheless, virtue ethics are of first importance, insofar as military organizations aim to cultivate soldiers, sailors, and airmen with specific sets of character traits, habits, and practices. This interest in moral development and moral virtue is especially evident in the missions and operations of service academies, officer training schools, and Reserve Officers' Training Corps programs. It also can be found in the programs for training enlisted personnel as well as the regular, annual training provided to operational forces.

When we consider virtue ethics as a moral theory, it is important to understand that there is no single account. Virtue ethics includes a family of theories with a rich and complex history, including ancient perspectives from the likes of Aristotle and the Stoics, as well as medieval perspectives such as that of Thomas Aquinas.[1] More recently, there has been a significant uptick of interest in virtue ethics, with notable yet very different approaches offered by Alasdair MacIntyre, Rosalind Hursthouse, Michael Slote, Robert Adams, Julia Annas, Nancy Sherman, Christine Swanton, Nancy Snow, and Daniel Russell, among many others.[2]

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While military theory and practice have not been insulated from these contemporary developments, military thinkers have tended to be attracted to the Stoics. The leading voices here are James Stockdale, Nancy Sherman, and Michael Evans.[3] The Stoics themselves do not speak with one voice, and the extant writings that we have from ancient Stoic authors do not offer the same kind of substance and depth that we find in contributors such as Aristotle and Aquinas. Epictetus's *Handbook,* for example, is a series of loosely connected aphorisms and short reflections. The same can be said of Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations*. Nevertheless, a close reading of Stoic texts reveals a set of themes that together outline a distinct and different approach to virtue ethics. In brief, while the ultimate good for humans is happiness, the Stoics regard the social world in which we try to attain this good as opaque, unfair, and out of our control. As a result, happiness must be achieved entirely in the inner life, as it is the only realm we can control. Emotions, insofar as they are responses to external events, must be regulated tightly or eliminated. The virtues themselves are inner, rational dispositions that contribute to self-control. Public service is valuable not for the attainment of honors or external goods, but as an opportunity to practice the virtues. Social attachments are grounded in a cosmopolitan respect for shared humanity. In the military context, the Stoic approach is thought to resonate with the international nature of conflict; the chaos of warfare; and the need for order, discipline, and bravery on the battlefield.

It seems to me, however, that military organizations' attraction to the Stoic approach to virtue ethics is misplaced. In this article, I will argue that an approach to virtue ethics inspired by Aristotle provides a better theoretical and practical foundation for military organizations than the approach offered by the Stoics. It is not just that Aristotle offers a more sophisticated account of human flourishing and the attendant virtues; his approach has the added value of speaking to military organizations on and off the battlefield in ways that are especially relevant to the nature of modern Western militaries and their activities. I will not be arguing that the approach of the Stoics is false or dangerous; I will argue instead that Aristotle's is simply better. In particular, the Aristotelian approach (1) is a better match for the institutional nature of modern Western military service, (2) incorporates a higher degree of flexibility, which allows the account to be adjusted appropriately to the variety of circumstances in which modern militaries operate, and (3) is better able to contend with the kinds of tragedies that are at the heart of the military experience in war.

The article is organized as follows. I begin with a comparative sketch of Aristotle's approach and the Stoic approach. I then point out salient features of modern Western military practice, noting how they comport with the systems of

Aristotle and the Stoics. At this stage I develop in detail the three areas in which I take Aristotle's account to be superior. I conclude with a comparative practical example: a brief sketch of how Aristotle's ethics might provide better resources for tackling the current challenge that modern Western militaries, especially the U.S. military, face in terms of eliminating sexual assault and sexual harassment.

COMPARATIVE ETHICS: ARISTOTLE

All virtue theoretic approaches begin with an account of the excellent person, especially the habits, traits, and practices that together constitute human excellence.[4] This focus on excellence of character contrasts with other prominent theoretical approaches to ethics, such as consequentialism, which focuses on the good that we bring about through our actions, and deontology, which focuses on the moral laws that we should obey. Among the virtue theoretic approaches, Aristotle's account is a complex affair with many moving parts. To frame a useful comparison with the Stoic account, I will focus on each account's answer to two questions. First, what is moral excellence? Second, what are the intrinsic limitations that we face in trying to achieve moral excellence? While there is much more that could be said, and indeed has been said, in defense of these two accounts in general, my argument here will focus narrowly on their comparative fitness for military professionals and their organizations. It is my view that our accounts' comparative answers to these two questions will be sufficient to determine which is better for the military context.

Moral Excellence according to Aristotle

Aristotle believed that moral excellence is found in a happy human community. By *happiness* we mean a life of "doing well" or "being well."[5] Many commentators propose that the *happy life* is understood best as the *flourishing life,* to distinguish it from the various trivializations of "happiness" that seem to have taken over contemporary Western culture. The flourishing human life, in turn, is defined in terms of human function.[6] In other words, just as we can determine what it means to be an excellent or flourishing dolphin if we have an account of the purposes, lives, and nature of dolphins, so we can determine what it means to be an excellent or flourishing human if we have an account of the purposes, lives, and nature of humans.[7] On that score, we observe that a full account of human function will make reference to psychological and sociological contexts, as these are main contexts within which humans live.

Psychologically speaking, every human being is composed of rational and nonrational faculties, where the nonrational faculties include those that are capable of listening to reason (appetites and passions) and those that are not (involuntary bodily functions).[8] According to Aristotle, moral excellence is found

at the intersection of the rational faculties and the nonrational faculties that are capable of listening to reason.[9] The morally excellent person uses her reason—or, more specifically, her deliberative and decision-making powers—to regulate her appetites and passions so she can fulfill those functions specific to the appetites and passions themselves. Aristotle is not suggesting that we suppress or eliminate our appetites and passions; instead he argues that, in a flourishing person, appetites and passions will be expressed in ways that accord with right reason. Simply put, the morally excellent person is the well-regulated person.

Moving from psychology to sociology, we note that the functions of our faculties of appetite and emotion often are connected to our social roles. At the same time, part of the human function is defined in terms of the various social and political roles that we fulfill in human community. For each of these discrete faculties and roles, Aristotle maintains that we can isolate a specific moral excellence in the mean between extremes. Consider three examples. Fear is an aspect of human emotion that serves as an indicator of and a response to a threat. As Aristotle puts it, when we are fearful at the right time, toward the right people, to the right degree, and so on, we achieve an excellence with respect to fear: bravery.[10] If one is fearful in the wrong circumstances, one has an excess of fear: the vice of cowardliness. If one fails to be fearful when the circumstances require it, one has a deficiency of fear: the vice of foolhardiness. Consider another example. In our everyday interactions with others, we find some people who are ingratiating: they never disagree and always offer praise. Others are quarrelsome: they object to everything and everyone. The mean between these extremes, according to Aristotle, is friendliness.[11] Finally, consider the hierarchical ordering of our various social and political roles. Given the contributions that we make in our families, communities, and businesses, we should expect an appropriate response, whether that be remuneration, recognition, or gratitude. In terms of extremes, those who seek out honors that do not befit their respective places in the community we call "honor loving," while those who are deficient fail to enjoy the honor that is their due. Aristotle does not give us a clear name for the virtue, other than to call it the virtue concerned with small honors.[12]

Multiplied across our passions, appetites, and social roles, overall moral excellence can be captured in a catalog of the virtues. Aristotle's own catalog names ten virtues of character; subsequent virtue theorists have provided different, often longer, lists. While Aristotle himself does not provide us with an explicit story of how we might determine which traits belong in our catalog and which do not, the theory behind his catalog suggests an account. Excellent character is a composite of excellences attached to our humanity, to our socioeconomic status, and to our social and political roles. In other words, the catalog of virtues is tied to one's specific psychological, sociological, and political functions.

As a result, the list of virtues for each person will be slightly different. Where we share a function with everyone else, we will have common virtues. Where we do not share a function with others or share a function with only a subgroup, we will have special virtues. Common virtues, in other words, include those attached to our universally shared features. These include virtues tied to our emotional life (e.g., bravery), our appetites (e.g., temperance), and the inescapably social nature of our species (e.g., friendliness).

Special virtues are those determined by the specific circumstances of our social, economic, and political conditions. Magnificence, Aristotle's virtue for generosity as it pertains to large gifts, will be relevant to me only if I have significant wealth. The virtue concerning small honors will be relevant to me only if I have no social and political potential for magnanimity, which is the virtue concerned with big honors. Outside of Aristotle's catalog, we can conceive of a host of additional special virtues. The virtues associated with being the firstborn (perhaps including special responsibilities for younger siblings and for older parents) will apply only if one is in fact the firstborn. The virtues associated with democratic citizenship (e.g., being well-informed, capable of deliberating over public policy, and committed to democratic decision-making processes) will apply only if one happens to live in a democracy. And the virtues associated with officership in the military of a democracy (e.g., loyalty, honor, integrity, and courage) will be determined by one's specific responsibilities and rank and the overall mission of the military institution.

Understood in this way, the catalog of virtues is derived from psychological and sociological facts about us. On the one hand, these grounds provide for a kind of universality and permanency in the catalog, insofar as our nature as human beings and the basic features of human life are unchanging. On the other hand, insofar as our roles and functions are defined at least in part by the particulars of our social and political circumstances, the catalog will have variations across individuals in their various social, cultural, and political circumstances. There will be lots of ways in which the specific conditions of our lives imply different roles and functions, which in turn will specify modified, and possibly novel, virtues.

It will be helpful, then, to notice the way that Aristotle organizes our various roles and functions within the broader social and political context. Moral excellence is not an individual achievement but instead the achievement of a community. Every flourishing person, in virtue of her humanity, is part of a larger social and political project. We are, as he phrases it, "political animals."[13] Put another way, humans are members of a species that flourishes in a particular type of community. Just like the ant, bee, wolf, or lion, the character of the individual human being cannot be understood fully apart from an understanding of her particular role or function in the community to which she belongs.

For his part, Aristotle describes a nested set of three communities: family, village, and community.[14] Our roles and functions in each of these communities imply an account of performing specific roles and functions excellently and, in turn, define part of the catalog of virtues that apply to us. In the family we might be a son or daughter, brother or sister, father or mother, husband or wife. In the village we have roles in terms of our vocation, in terms of our property and neighbors, and in terms of our local institutions. In the community we are defined in terms of our citizenship in general as well as in terms of any specific role we might occupy in the institutions of the community (e.g., legislator, soldier, judge). With respect to each role that I occupy in my family, village, and community, we can specify what it means to flourish, and then in turn identify those virtues that contribute to, as well as constitute, my flourishing in that context. Some of these will be specialized versions of virtues of which I make use in other contexts; others will be unique to my particular roles. Insofar as our roles change over the course of our lives, our catalog will change as well. This does not mean that morality is relative; it means instead that moral excellence is context sensitive. Human life is not a static or uniform experience; any description of the excellences required for flourishing must be adjusted to fit our circumstances.

Despite the variety of catalogs of virtues that apply to individuals, Aristotle argues that we can identify an unchanging common good: the good of the community. The good of the community is the flourishing of the community qua community. This is the chief good, such that the goods of all the other components of the community are subordinate to it. We must be careful here, however: to say that the goods of the components of the community are subordinate is not to say that they simply are means to achieving the chief good. Nor are we saying that the chief good is simply the aggregate of all the goods of the components. Aristotle's account here is more nuanced. The goods of the subordinate communities are ends in themselves as well as means to achieving the chief good. It is also correct to say that they are constituents of the chief good, although the chief good cannot be defined purely in terms of the achievement of its subordinate elements. Overall excellence or flourishing is achieved not merely by my excellence as a family member and a village member; it also requires my excellence as a citizen—a role that cannot be reduced to the others.

Moral Limitations according to Aristotle

The excellent or flourishing community, together with the morally excellent people who constitute it, is vulnerable on Aristotle's account. Some forms of attack or corruption will be sufficient to impair excellence and flourishing both for individuals and for the community as a whole. We can distinguish two kinds of challenges to the flourishing of the community: internal challenges and external.

Consider one form of internal challenge. The moral virtues are habits that must be cultivated through a program of education that includes apprenticeship under those who have a high degree of mastery of the virtues already. For example, one learns to be brave under the tutelage of brave people. But if a sociopolitical system lacks a program of education in the virtues or lacks exemplars, moral excellence becomes very difficult to achieve. A second form of internal challenge is associated with the intelligibility of the social world. Identifying the special virtues associated with one's various social roles presupposes a clearly defined set of social roles as well as a clear understanding of what one's social roles are. Otherwise, one's account of excellence in one's various functions will be incomplete, vague, or perhaps missing altogether. But in contemporary societies, especially the large, complex, and disorganized societies that characterize the West, we find just these kinds of challenges to the clarity of social roles and our understandings of our respective places.

External threats to the flourishing of an otherwise morally excellent community are often more straightforward. External threats such as war, natural disaster, or the scarcity of natural resources can undermine the ability of a community to achieve and maintain flourishing. Sometimes, despite our best efforts, circumstances that are completely out of our control can get the better of us.

Taken together, the vulnerabilities associated with these two types of challenges imply that a people can fail to achieve moral excellence and that, in many cases, this failure can happen through no fault of their own. In other words, moral tragedy is a real possibility in Aristotle's world; human excellence or flourishing is dependent on circumstances that are, at least in part, out of our control.

COMPARATIVE ETHICS: STOICISM

Let us turn now to the Stoic account and consider the Stoic answers to these same questions. Of course, in one sense there is no single Stoic answer, insofar as Stoicism is a philosophical school with many adherents but no dominant voice. We also do not have a complete record of Stoic teachings. Nevertheless, we can detect themes that run throughout Stoic writings—themes that provide a sense of the Stoic account, and themes that have been picked up by military ethicists such as Sherman, Stockdale, and Evans. In fact, since these contemporary writers serve as the primary lens through which many military members and organizations have been introduced to Stoicism, it is their interpretation that provides the best target for our discussion here. Just as with Aristotle, we cannot hope to provide a comprehensive account, but we can present a contrasting picture that will be sufficient for discussing the relative merits of the Stoic perspective for contemporary military service.

Moral Excellence according to the Stoics

It is important to keep in mind that the Stoic approach to virtue ethics is deeply indebted to Aristotle. While virtue theory, broadly considered, is the central approach to ethics for most of the thinkers throughout the Greek and Roman world, Aristotle's account is among the most prominent, and philosophers who come after him presuppose aspects of his view even when they attempt to depart from it. Stoic philosophers, for their part, see themselves as developing or improving on earlier accounts. One way to exercise charity in reading the Stoics is to regard their comparative lack of theoretical sophistication as a reflection of a common philosophical background and a common set of assumptions. In other words, perhaps they are understood best as taking much of Greek philosophy, including Aristotle, for granted, and then focusing their own efforts on the few places where they believe the account should be updated.

Taking this approach, we can see a variety of ways in which the Stoics modify Aristotle's account of moral excellence. With Aristotle, we saw that my happiness is only partly under my control. Since I am a dependent and social creature, my own good is bound up with the good of others: if my community is not flourishing, then I am not flourishing. In other words, living a flourishing life depends, at least in part, on good moral luck. The Stoics find this approach entirely wrongheaded. As they see it, the excellent or flourishing life ought to be in my power, not arbitrarily subject to the choices of others. Aurelius writes, "[T]rue good fortune is what you make for yourself. Good fortune: good character, good intentions, and good actions."[15] In other words, my happiness should be entirely up to me: if I can develop the right kind of character, I can control my own destiny. Evans provides a summary as follows:

> In the Stoic catechism there is no such category as "victimhood" because there is no moral economy outside of the workings of our inner selves. Stoicism is thus about empowerment by perception—a cultivation of an invincibility of the will through minimizing personal vulnerability by a mixture of Socratic self-examination and an emphasis on control of the emotions. Stoicism teaches concentration on what individuals can control, what Marcus Aurelius in his *Meditations* called the "inner citadel" of the soul.[16]

The Stoic focus on controlling our fate changes the nature of our moral life in many ways, but for the purpose of developing an argument with application to contemporary military service I will focus on just two: individualism and interiorization. By *individualism,* I mean the way in which Stoics focus on the ethics of the individual rather than the ethics of the community; by *interiorization,* I mean the way in which Stoics focus on the mental lives of individuals rather than their actions. Both of these modifications reflect Stoic objections to Aristotle's program.

Let us begin with individualism. Stoics agree that the flourishing person has excellent character, and excellent character is a matter of having a specific set of moral virtues.[17] Stoic catalogs of the virtues are different from Aristotle's: sometimes they include virtues that appear to be broader in scope, such as righteousness, honor, and dignity; at other times, Stoics hint at virtues that reflect a disengaged or aesthetic life. Aurelius, for example, lists honesty, gravity, endurance, austerity, resignation, abstinence, patience, sincerity, moderation, seriousness, and high-mindedness.[18]

The more important contrast, for our purposes, can be found in the different aims of the Stoic virtues. On the Stoic account, the cultivation and exercise of these virtues have value primarily for the development of the character of the individual, not for the sake of the community. Aurelius writes, "[P]eople are our proper occupation. Our job is to do them good and put up with them. But when they obstruct our proper tasks, they become irrelevant to us—like wind, sun, and animals. Our actions may be impeded by them, but there can be no impeding our intentions or dispositions."[19]

Every action stands on its own as a measure of the character of the agent who performs it, independent of the value of the action for the community. I am not responsible for the actions of others, and they cannot be responsible for my own actions. After all, I cannot control them and they cannot control me. My own good is therefore my ultimate point of reference, as it is the only thing I truly can control. In this way, the Stoic approach to happiness is far more individualistic than the approach offered by Aristotle. Where Aristotle views the ethical life as a joint enterprise aimed at *building* our social and political world, the Stoics view the ethical life as an individual enterprise aimed at achieving excellence *despite* our social and political world.

This contrast should not be especially surprising. Aristotle's starting point in his writing, as in his life, is the self-contained social and political unity of the Greek city-state. Stoic writers, in contrast, are lost in the vast, diverse, cosmopolitan expanse of the Roman Empire. Correspondingly, the Stoics view the social world as opaque, cruel, and arbitrary—utterly outside the control of the individual. To be sure, Stoics were not the kind of pessimists who aim at disengagement; they were not the Roman equivalent of modern doomsday preppers. Stoics call for service, kindness, and other forms of social engagement. Moreover, Stoics themselves were active for the good of their friends and their communities, whatever their stations and circumstances. Cicero and Seneca were Roman politicians; Marcus Aurelius was a soldier and emperor. But all these exercises of the social virtues reflect a much more detached approach to our social and political world, an approach centered on the character of the individual agent. At the same time,

Stoic social and political engagement did not have as its primary objective the achievement of a common good or the construction of a flourishing community.

In the midst of this chaotic world, it seems fair to ask the Stoic whether moral excellence or flourishing is even possible. This brings us to the second point of contrast between the Stoic approach and the Aristotelian approach: the interiorization of the moral life. When Aristotle allows that tragedy can make an otherwise virtuous person unhappy, the Stoics recoil. They propose instead a system in which happiness is not at all dependent on one's social, political, and physical circumstances. Aurelius writes as follows:

> If you do the job in a principled way, with diligence, energy and patience, if you keep yourself free of distractions, and keep the spirit inside you undamaged, as if you might have to give it back at any moment—If you can embrace this without fear or expectation—can find fulfillment in what you're doing now, as Nature intended, and in superhuman truthfulness (every word, every utterance)—then your life will be happy. No one can prevent that.[20]

In other words, the happy life is a matter of internal rather than external fulfillment. Whatever the state of the world around me, it is still possible for me to have excellent character. I can accomplish this, the Stoics explain, provided that I achieve the following.

First, I must come to terms with the fact that happiness has nothing to do with external successes. Epictetus writes, "Do not seek to have events happen to you as you want them to, but instead want them to happen as they do happen, and your life will go well."[21] If happiness lies entirely within my control, and the only things over which I have complete control are my internal responses and my internal life, then I must learn to master my internal life and avoid seeking happiness in external goods. External goods of wealth, fame, and power are outside my control; it would be a mistake to put my happiness in them. To be sure, this does not mean that Stoics eschew these goods. Stoicism need not imply a monkish way of life; such a way of life itself could become an object of worship. Instead, the Stoic avoids emotional attachment to external goods. Epictetus explains somewhat graphically: "It shows lack of natural talent to spend time on what concerns the body, as in exercising a great deal, eating a great deal, drinking a great deal, moving one's bowels or copulating a great deal. Instead you must do these things in passing, but turn your whole attention toward your faculty of judgment."[22] In other words, it is our attitude toward external goods that matters, not the goods themselves.

Second, I need to learn to be guided by reason alone. While our social and political world may be chaotic, the universe as a whole is guided by reason. There is a natural order or a law of nature that I discover and toward which I can orient my will. Again, Epictetus: "On every occasion you must have these thoughts

ready: lead me, Zeus, and you too, Destiny, wherever I am assigned by you; I'll follow and not hesitate, but even if I do not wish to, because I'm bad, I'll follow anyway. Whoever has complied well with necessity is counted wise by us, and understands divine affairs."[23]

To do this, I must learn to control my emotions. In particular, I must recondition my emotional life so that I am not emotionally sensitive to the things that I see and the events that befall me, no matter how pleasurable or cruel they may be. Sherman explains the Stoic perspective here: "They hold that emotions, as most of us experience them, typically involve assent to false opinions. That is, the impressions we assent to have a propositional structure . . . and emotions typically involve false opinions of good and evil."[24] It is not that Stoics eschew emotions altogether; what they claim instead is that our emotional responses must be keyed solely to our mental life. We can take pleasure in our virtuous intentions, but not in the results that come from actions that accord with those virtuous intentions. After all, the results of our actions, no matter how well intended they may be, are not in our control.

Third, and in keeping with the previous achievements, I must cultivate inner strength, especially fortitude, if I am to flourish in the midst of the cruel and harsh world in which we live. Not only is my social and political context outside my control; it actually tends to pose a threat to my physical, social, and political well-being. In this way, inner happiness is something that I must achieve despite my suffering. Suffering and death are inevitable. Aurelius's *Meditations,* in particular, are preoccupied heavily with reminders of the shortness of life and the inevitability of death: "[K]now this: Human lives are brief and trivial. Yesterday a blob of semen; tomorrow embalming fluid, ash. To pass through this brief life as nature demands. To give it up without complaint. Like an olive that ripens and falls. Praising its mother, thanking the tree it grew on."[25]

Moral Limitations according to the Stoics

From the preceding discussion, it should be evident that if the Stoic life can be achieved, there will be no limits on my happiness. Insofar as I resist the temptations of worldly goods and worldly pleasures, I can create for myself an impenetrable mental fortress—a place where I am immune to the effects of tragedy, a place in which I can be happy, though the world may fall apart. As Sherman explains, for the Stoics, "[H]appiness must be a matter of virtue alone."[26]

This is not to say that Stoicism is easy. Reconditioning my emotional life according to the Stoic program is especially difficult, as my emotions seem to be naturally responsive to my experience in the world and not to the particulars of my character. Stoics recognize the challenges here. They remind followers that Stoic ideals are achieved to one degree or another; one need not achieve

perfection to have made progress. Flourishing does not require the complete realization of the ideal; further achievement with respect to happiness is always possible. Whatever the world may throw at me, my happiness remains in my control, and I can take steps to achieve it all the more. Evans quotes Henley's 1875 poem "Invictus" to make the point:

> Out of the night that covers me,
>   Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
> I thank whatever gods may be
>   For my unconquerable soul.
>
> In the fell clutches of circumstance
>   I have not winced nor cried aloud.
> Under the bludgeonings of chance
>   My head is bloody, but unbowed.
>
> Beyond this place of wrath and tears
>   Looms but the horror of the shade,
> And yet the menace of the years
>   Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.
>
> It matters not how strait the gate,
>   How charged with punishment the scroll.
> I am the master of my fate:
>   I am the captain of my soul.[27]

THE SUPERIORITY OF ARISTOTLE IN THE MODERN MILITARY WORLD

At first blush, one can see the attraction of the Stoic approach to the military context. Soldiers on the contemporary battlefield are expected to perform excellently when their lives are under constant threat, often in the midst of great suffering, and under strategic and tactical conditions that are nearly always out of their control. The fear of death can be psychologically paralyzing; the Stoic power to eliminate that fear and concentrate single-mindedly on the tasks at hand sounds like liberation for the soldier in combat. James Stockdale famously remembered thinking to himself, as he parachuted into a North Vietnamese village, that he was "entering the world of Epictetus."[28] Stockdale believed the Stoic approach described above was vital to his survival as a prisoner of war (POW) in North Vietnam, and vital to his effective leadership there.

On the one hand, we should not dismiss Stockdale's experiences, or those of other soldiers who have found resilience and liberation in Stoic philosophy, with

a mere wave of the hand or a short piece of philosophical argument. Certainly under POW conditions, there is very little among our externalities that we can control, and any happiness that we find likely will be a matter of the inner character and strength that the Stoics describe. It may be that the Stoic approach to pain and suffering could be a helpful addition to certain parts of military training, especially those concerned with survival and capture.

On the other hand, the conditions in which Stoicism seems especially pertinent are not the experiences of the vast majority of soldiers in the modern military. Instead, soldiers in modern militaries are contributors to an enormous and complex social and political project, a project that requires creativity and flexibility, and a project that can and sometimes does go wrong. In my view, this is the world of Aristotle, not the world of Epictetus. In providing a detailed argument for the superiority of Aristotle's approach, I will focus on three features: the institutional setting of modern Western military service, the need for higher degrees of flexibility, and the reality of tragedy.

In the first place, Aristotle's account is better suited to the institutional conditions of contemporary military service. Unlike the Stoics, Aristotle does not view the social world as opaque and arbitrary. Aristotle's theory is not concerned with explaining how we might flourish in spite of our institutions, but more optimistically provides a road map for the creation and development of excellent institutions in which we can flourish together. The fact is, modern Western military conditions and practices are well suited for this approach, especially in those aspects that extend beyond individual psychology. Each soldier has a specific role to play associated with her unit, and the description of this role implies an account of excellence. Each unit, in turn, is part of a larger unit in the military organization, where that military organization in turn plays a very specific role in the good of the state. Thus we have a set of elements analogous to the family, the village, and the community. The chief good for the soldier is found in the good of the state, while the military itself plays a specific role in sustaining that good. As with Aristotle's other intermediate institutions, the good for the military is neither a mere means to nor a mere constituent of the good of the state. Soldiering is both an end in itself and a means to the achievement of other ends. At the same time, the achievement of the good for the military and its units is a necessary condition for the achievement of the good for the state, but in the sense that the specific good for the military organization is an end itself, a means through which other aspects of the state can achieve their good, as well as a constituent element in the complex common good by which we assess the state as a whole.

This organizational structure is not merely thrust on soldiers in modern militaries; instead they construct and sustain it. Both officers and enlisted personnel are expected to take on leadership roles gradually, using their experience,

together with the guidance of their superiors, to build and rebuild the organization in keeping with an account of its good that they are responsible for formulating and reformulating. In this way, the institution presupposes that its members will exercise control over it, despite the challenges of size and complexity. Notice that this account contrasts sharply with the Stoic approach to social and political institutions. While Stoics allow for public service and contributions to the good of the community, the Stoic must not take on the good of these institutions as her own. To do so would be to accept the existence of external goods and subject one's own happiness to the judgments and actions of others. Insofar as social trust is built on identity of interests, shared commitments, and common purpose, Stoically oriented soldiers will not be as trustworthy as Aristotelians in the project of building and sustaining modern military organizations.

In the second place, Aristotle's account allows for significantly more creativity and flexibility than the account we get from the Stoics. Aristotle's virtue of prudence is proactive: one evaluates the circumstances in which one finds oneself, identifies the goods relevant to one's circumstances and the circumstances of one's group, and then identifies practices and activities that will contribute to the accomplishment of those goods. Since the common good is always in view, Aristotle's soldiers never are preoccupied with their own individual happiness—after all, their own individual good is a constituent of and a means to accomplishing the common good, given the natures of their particular roles. By definition, the Aristotelian does not interiorize her ethical life—the common good is exterior, at least with respect to the others that compose her group.

War is, at least in one sense, a violent competition among groups with (at least) two different visions of the good. Stoics who distance themselves from the common good, and who view the external world as a place of temptation and cruelty, seem to be unattractive partners in the social and political project that is modern warfare. To be sure, it appears that Stoic detachment could be useful in a narrow range of circumstances in modern warfare, such as when captured by the enemy—Stockdale's experience. Nevertheless, it seems to me that proponents of Stoicism under these conditions miss the fact that Aristotle's virtue of prudence, with its context-sensitive adjustment to new circumstances, could prescribe an account of flourishing similar to that prescribed by the Stoics under conditions of capture. In other words, where the Stoics propose a rigid morality of detachment, Aristotle proposes a kind of adaptability that could recommend a degree of emotional detachment when circumstances call for it. When an Aristotelian finds himself in a social structure that is inimical to flourishing in the conventional way (e.g., family, village, community), he will look for ways to make the best of his circumstances. In fact, Stockdale's own experience as a POW had far more Aristotelian elements than he seems to have recognized. By accepting a leadership role

among the other captured Americans, by promulgating principles for prisoner behavior, and by finding ways to encourage others in the midst of their suffering, Stockdale remained committed to the good of the American prisoners, not just as individuals but as Americans committed to the good of the United States.[29]

Finally, Aristotle's account has a better approach to error and tragedy. Where the Stoic is expected to be "astonished at nothing," Aristotle recognizes the possibility of genuine errors, mistakes, and tragedies in the context of military service and war. Not every social structure conforms to the ideal; warfare, quite obviously, is a nonideal social circumstance. Things have gone wrong, possibly quite badly, and this is a genuine tragedy for Aristotelians—the social structures that support a life lived according to the virtues and in pursuit of joint goods have broken down, thereby reducing the amount of happiness that is possible in the moment. The Stoic response would appear to be to chide the Aristotelian for looking for happiness outside herself; the Stoics insist that it can be found reliably only within. In this way, the Stoic detaches herself from the possibility of tragedy, from the very idea that our circumstances can be described as bad or good. However, it seems to me that if we do not recognize tragedy, we will have little motivation to work to prevent it in the future. Whatever the merits of the Stoic approach as it concerns the resilience of the individual, the fact is that modern soldiers in modern militaries strive for more. Military action often aims at stopping and responding to tragedy, and even learning from it so as to put in place measures to prevent it from recurring. Tragedy cannot be eliminated from warfare, insofar as good men and women always will suffer and die; however, our response should not be to structure our mental life so we are not affected by tragedy, but instead to rejoin more forcefully the challenge of building institutions, practices, and soldiers who are adept at minimizing internal and external harms. Modern institutions like the military aim to improve performance, achieve efficiencies, and accomplish very specific common ends. More generally, our political systems and political leaders should be striving to find peace and support flourishing nations and citizens. The Stoic ethic, with its much more limited focus on the good of the individual, does not seem to be as good a fit as the Aristotelian ethic, with its focus on building a flourishing set of nested institutions.

THE SPECIAL CASE OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT

In recent years, the U.S. military has become especially concerned with incidents of sexual assault and harassment inside the organization. Leaders are looking for better ways to catch and remove those who perpetrate these crimes, as well as ways to build a culture of zero tolerance. Both are goals of long standing, but they have proved elusive. Insofar as virtue theorists are concerned with cultivating individual and social moral excellence, and a culture of sexual harassment and

sexual assault falls well short, they would seem to have something to contribute to the conversation.

Stoicism, with its virtues of righteousness and decency, offers an account of a moral soldier and a military culture consistent with the elimination of sexual assault and sexual harassment. The Stoic focus on cultivating resilience in the face of personal suffering also might prove useful to victims. However, there seem to be very few resources in Stoicism that might provide better guidance for solving the problem. As it stands, it is not as if the message of treating one's fellow soldiers with decency is absent, nor is resilience missing from contemporary military training. Quite the opposite: in the annual sexual assault prevention and response training that members (including myself) of the U.S. Defense Department of all ranks receive, respect and resilience as ethical virtues are central themes. Yet sexual harassment and assault persist.

Aristotle provides a richer theoretical framework from which to start our reflections on how to make progress on this issue. We begin with the observation that the vast majority of the sexual assault and harassment incidents involve men assaulting or harassing women. Instead of focusing on individuals qua individuals and promoting general virtues such as respect and decency, Aristotle would begin by identifying the psychological, sociological, and political conditions that give rise to the trends we observe. In other words, if there is a problem that seems to be connected to a particular demographic, it makes sense to start at the level of sociological investigation to determine root causes across the population. Why do men tend to be the perpetrators; why do women tend to be the victims?

At the same time, Aristotle would begin to think about solutions from inside the sociological circumstances. What are the social norms and virtues that we expect men and women to cultivate in the context of their relationships, both to the military and to each other? Notice that, in answering this question, Aristotle would be concerned not only with preventing bad behavior but with cultivating good behavior. Remember, in Aristotle's virtue theoretic account, bad moral behavior occurs when a person tends toward the extreme of some feeling, appetite, or social role, rather than toward the mean. The cowardly person has too much fear, the brave person has the right amount; the overly social person is ingratiating, the friendly person is social to the right degree.

If sexual assault and harassment are actions attached to vices that are akin to cowardice, then what is the feeling, appetite, or social role that is in question? Suppose, insofar as sexuality is a psychological and sociological aspect of human beings, that there are virtues and vices associated with human sexuality. If sexual assault and sexual harassment are vices with respect to human sexuality, then it follows that there also must be virtues associated with sexual excellence and sexual flourishing. Moreover, since vices fall on the extremes and virtues fall in

the mean between the extremes, any program to reduce vice is, for Aristotle, at the same time a program to improve virtue; we cannot help but cultivate bravery in the process of reducing cowardice.

In other words, an Aristotelian program for reducing or eliminating sexual assault and harassment must be, at the same time, a program aimed at cultivating sexual excellence and sexual flourishing. The important practical implication of this story, Aristotle would argue, is that we cannot institute programs to change the culture and practices that encourage sexual assault and harassment until we have a clear account of the culture and practices that cultivate sexual excellence and flourishing. This, of course, means that we need a robust account of sexual excellence and sexual flourishing in the first place. For Aristotelians, such an account cannot simply be a set of rules, e.g., all sex must be consensual. Although Aristotelians are happy to include laws, rules, and principles in their social and political schemes, they would not want their approach to be confused with or reduced to a deontological approach. Instead, Aristotelians will search for an account of how human sexuality contributes to the excellent functioning of human beings as individuals and in their relationships with others.

It is these two pieces of information—an account of sexual flourishing, together with an account of the social conditions that will cultivate and sustain it best—that we need if we are to make genuine progress in eliminating sexual assault and harassment from military organizations. On the one hand, the unfortunate fact is that at present we do not possess either of them. While the second piece of information is something we could investigate as a matter of psychology and sociology, the first is not. An account of sexual excellence and sexual flourishing is a matter of ethics, and therefore not a matter of conventional empirical research. Certainly, ethical research, together with common and historical experience, has resulted in agreement on important issues. We reject slavery, murder, and adultery, and we affirm the importance of equal treatment and opportunity across distinctions of race and gender. Nevertheless, the content of sexual ethics does not appear to be one of these areas of agreement. At present we do not have a social or political consensus sufficient to serve as the basis for a program of improvement.

Unfortunately, Aristotle's own views will not be of much help here. Among the things on which we do agree is that Aristotle's patriarchal approach to family relationships, grounded on his belief that women are inferior to men, is wrong. While he does not offer an explicit theory of sexual excellence or sexual flourishing, we safely can assume that any theory he would offer would be grounded on assumptions that we reject.

On the other hand, if we are in agreement that these two pieces of information are what we need if we are to make progress, we can devote our attention

to acquiring them. This means, in the first place, that we need to have a serious discussion about human sexuality, with an eye toward developing an account of an excellent and flourishing sexual life. Perhaps we never will agree on all the particulars, and perhaps there are groups that always will insist on their own eccentric views. But we may find that there are areas of agreement that will be sufficient to establish a counterweight to the vices of sexual assault and sexual harassment, even if we cannot agree on a comprehensive account of the ideal. With these areas of agreement in hand, we then can turn to social science to make progress in determining what types of institutional and cultural changes will achieve these ends best. Together, these two pieces of information constitute the heart of an Aristotelian approach to solving the problem of sexual harassment and sexual assault in military organizations.

Stockdale kept a copy of Epictetus's *Handbook* on his bedside table aboard ship during the Vietnam War. Admittedly, the *Handbook* may be better suited for bedtime reading in wartime; its short paragraphs and aphorisms are pithy, memorable, and challenging, and have the appearance of offering important and profound wisdom on how an individual might find happiness amid daily mortal threat and uncertainty.

  In contrast, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and his *Politics* do not make for good bedtime reading. They offer complicated and open-ended arguments that require serious interpretive work to be relevant to our modern conditions. In this way, Aristotle is a bit like the road less traveled. And yet the implication of the argument I have made here is that our military forces and our character-education programs would be much better off following the Aristotelian than the Stoic path. While it might be more difficult, the payoff will be much better.

NOTES

An earlier version of this work was presented as a paper at the annual meeting of the International Society for Military Ethics at the University of Notre Dame, South Bend, Indiana, October 13–16, 2013.

1. Key source material here includes Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* trans. Terence Irwin, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1999); Epictetus, *Handbook (The Encheiridion),* trans. Nicholas P. White (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1983); and Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations: A New Translation,* trans. Gregory Hays (New York: Random House, 2003). For Thomas

Aquinas, see *Treatise on the Virtues,* trans. John A. Oesterle (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

2. See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue,* 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 2007); Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002); Michael Slote, *Morals from Motives* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2003); Robert M. Adams, *A Theory of Virtue* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009); Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011); Nancy Sherman, *The Fabric of Character: Aristotle's*

Theory of Virtue (New York: Clarendon, 1991); Nancy Snow, *Virtue as Social Intelligence: An Empirically Grounded Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2009); and Daniel Russell, *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009).

3. Jim Stockdale, *Thoughts of a Philosophical Fighter Pilot* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution, 1995); Nancy Sherman, *Stoic Warriors: The Ancient Philosophy behind the Military Mind* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005); Michael Evans, "Stoic Philosophy and the Profession of Arms," *Quadrant Online,* January 1, 2010, quadrant.org.au/; and Michael Evans, "Captains of the Soul: Stoic Philosophy and the Western Profession of Arms in the Twenty-First Century," *Naval War College Review* 64, no. 1 (Winter 2011), pp. 31–58.

4. This is not to claim that all accounts of virtue theory begin with happiness or *eudaimonia.* As we will see below, this is how Aristotle's account begins, but there are other contemporary approaches that develop an account of the virtues without a connection to *eudaimonia.*

5. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* bk. 1, chap. 4.

6. Ibid., bk. 1, chap. 7.

7. See Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999), chap. 7.

8. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* bk. 1, chap. 13.

9. Ibid., bk. 2, chap. 1.

10. Ibid., bk. 3, chap. 7.

11. Ibid., bk. 4, chap. 6.

12. Ibid., bk. 4, chap. 5.

13. Aristotle, *Politics,* trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1998), bk. 1, chap. 3.

14. Aristotle writes in terms of a city (i.e., a *polis*) rather than a community. Modern cities are quite different from what Aristotle has in mind; in the modern context, "community" implies the kind of small, unified, largely self-sufficient group that is Aristotle's focus.

15. Aurelius, *Meditations,* p. 64.

16. Evans, "Stoic Philosophy," pp. 1–2.

17. See Evans, "Captains of the Soul," pp. 33–40.

18. Aurelius, *Meditations,* p. 54.

19. Ibid., p. 60.

20. Ibid., p. 33.

21. Epictetus, *Handbook,* p. 13.

22. Ibid., p. 25.

23. Ibid., p. 29.

24. Sherman, *Stoic Warriors,* p. 9.

25. Aurelius, *Meditations,* p. 48.

26. Sherman, *Stoic Warriors,* p. 27.

27. Cited in Evans, "Captains of the Soul," pp. 43–44.

28. See James B. Stockdale [Vice Adm., USN (Ret.)], *Stockdale on Stoicism II: Master of My Fate,* Occasional Paper 2 (Annapolis, MD: Center for the Study of Professional Military Ethics, n.d.), p. 5, available at www.usna.edu/.

29. See ibid., pp. 8–12.