May 1st, 9:00 AM - 10:15 AM

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The Role of Stoic Philosophy in Military Leadership and Values

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18 March 2019
Throughout history, military power has frequently been the deciding factor in the strength and longevity of a ruler’s reign. But this military power needs people and needs justification, especially as domestic and international political systems developed over time and power came not just through fear. Many rulers chose to turn to philosophy to justify not only the actions they take, but also to explain to themselves and members of their armies the reason to endure hardships during military campaigns. Stoicism, which teaches that internal values and thoughts allow a person to rise above external struggles, is a deeply popular and influential philosophy, especially the stoicism taught by Epictetus.

The philosophy of Epictetus was deeply influenced by his life experiences. He was born in Hierapolis in about 55 C.E., but came to Rome as a slave sometime during his childhood. While he was a slave, he studied stoic philosophy, which led him to become a teacher of philosophy after he was freed. While he was enslaved, he became permanently disabled, which deeply influenced his outlook on life. He was drawn to the teaching of stoicism, eventually become a teacher in Epirus, in North-West Greece, where he was well known and well regarded. Epictetus was a stoic philosopher in the manner of early stoics, such as Zeno and Chrysippus. The teachings and writings of Epictetus show a great regard for what these previous great stoics taught, quoting them in arguments and relying heavily on their ideas with very few significant philosophical changes.

One of the main tenets of stoicism is the idea of subjective consciousness, the ability to separate how a person is impacted by internal and external factors and to not let external events positively or negatively influence one’s emotions or attitude. Epictetus, like other stoics, taught that to be truly satisfied with life and to be a virtuous person, people must rely on their minds and reactions instead of external events. In the *Enchiridion* he writes “The condition and characteristic of a vulgar person is that he never looks for either help or harm from himself, but only from externals. The condition and characteristic of a philosopher is that he looks to himself for all help or harm.” Since Epictetus was born a slave and experienced many difficulties throughout his life, it makes sense that he turned to stoicism to explain how to live a fulfilling

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2 Seddon, Keith H. Seddon H. "Epictetus (55–135 C.E.)."
life, and it is no surprise that stoicism has been adopted by many historical figures, including military leaders like Marcus Aurelius and Frederick the Great, as well as several United States presidents, including Theodore Roosevelt and George Washington.

Epictetus is best known for the two books that explain his teachings, neither of which he actually wrote himself. One of his students, Flavius Arrian, wrote *Discourses*, as well as the *Enchiridion*, or “the handbook” as it is often known. The *Discourses* are a collection of notes from informal conversations between Epictetus and his students. Because of this format, the book jumps from topic to topic, covering issues from friendship to poverty to anger within a few pages. By comparison, the *Enchiridion* is much shorter and is often considered to be a sort of abstract of the *Discourses*, focusing on the key themes and teachings of stoicism, the most prominent of which is the idea of subjective consciousness.

Stoic philosophy emphasises that external circumstances are well outside the control of any person, and that basing mental and emotional wellbeing on external events and criteria will only lead to disappointment. This belief in training the mind to not tie internal emotions to external events has been popular among members of the military, who must endure emotional and physical struggles. Epictetus himself connects the struggles of daily life to the struggles that members of the military must face, saying “Do you not know that life is a soldier’s service? . . . So too it is in the world; each man’s life is a campaign, and a long and varied one. It is for you to play the soldier’s part—do everything at the General’s bidding, divining his wishes, if it be possible”. Epictetus thought of life as a military campaign, so it makes sense that members of the military were drawn to stoicism.

From Marcus Aurelius to Frederick the Great to the United States Army, members of the military have often claimed to be guided by the principles of stoicism, often citing Epictetus’s *Enchiridion* as the source of their beliefs. However, historical analysis of all three of these military forces casts doubt on the effects of their philosophical beliefs on their actions and outcomes. No matter how firmly they hold their personal convictions, those views are rarey, if

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ever, seen in widespread political or military actions, although they can influence individual actions.6

Another Roman stoic was Marcus Aurelius, although he came from very different roots than Epictetus. He was the adoptive son of the Roman Emperor Antoninus Pius and was deeply educated in philosophy, as well as rhetoric and political thought. He became Emperor in 161 CE and reigned until his death 19 years later. His rule was full of turmoil and conflict, with invasions from Germany, rebellions from within his empire, and numerous outbreaks of the plague.7 Much of what is currently know about his personal and philosophical views are from his writings in his personal journal, Meditations, part of which was written during military campaigns near the end of his rule. Meditations shows influence from stoic, especially the works of Epictetus, and includes several references and quotes attributed to Epictetus8, as well as a note of gratitude to his teacher and friend for giving him a copy of the Enchiridion.9 However, his decisions during his rule show that that his personal philosophical views did not translate to practical actions as a military leader or as an emperor. An analysis done of laws passed during Marcus Aurelius’ rule show no distinct stoic influence.10 Instead his choices are very much in line with actions of his contemporaries, if slightly more targeted at helping underserved communities. According to G. R. Stanton, “there are no obvious connections between Marcus' Meditations and the main points of the legislation attributed to him.”11 The laws passed during his rule show a desire for power and a ruler who maintained the status quo, instead of enacting reforms that would have been more in line with stoic philosophy. Stanton argues that

“Marcus Aurelius, then, appears as emperor and philosopher, imperator el philosophus, but he is unable to unite the two roles. Rather his Stoic philosophy, like his opium addiction, serves as insulation against the discomfort of the Roman frontiers and the

6 This distinction between individual and organizational action is apparent in a study of the United States military especially. Individual soldiers, like James Stockdale who is discussed later in this essay, have relied on their philosophical
9 Kamtekar, Rachana. "Marcus Aurelius."
11 Stanton, G. R. "Marcus Aurelius, Emperor and Philosopher."
realities of Roman politics. Marcus gives scant thought to the application of his philosophical beliefs; they are too bound up in their own image".  

Despite his infatuation with the ideals of stoicisim, it would seem that Marcus is unable to actually put them into action.  

In Meditations, Marcus writes “Every man's happiness depends from himself, but behold thy life is almost at an end, whiles affording thyself no respect, thou dost make thy happiness to consist in the souls, and conceits of other men.” This thought is a direct derivation of the concept of subjective consciousness and show that Marcus Aurelius was well aware of stoic philosophy, however there is little evidence that he truly put them into action. P. Noyan, the researcher who compiled the first analysis of laws passed under Marcus Aurelius, writes “Whoever wants to throw light upon a historical character, should never believe implicitly whatever that character writes in a diary. If he does, he runs the risk of ascribing to him the historical character he is pretending to be, but which he is not actually.” No matter what a person’s personal beliefs are, they are likely to still operate with another set of morals and values in the public sphere, especially when they are as well known and high ranking as the Emperor of Rome.  

Another ruler who is widely cited as being an adherent to the stoic philosophy is Frederick the Great. But similarly to Marcus Aurelius, there is very little evidence that his stoic philosophy was ever reflected in his rule or military actions. Much like Marcus Aurelius, Frederick the Great was brought up in a powerful family, led by his father Frederick William I, the then ruler of Prussia, a strict and unimaginative military ruler. Frederick the Great was a much more romantic thinker than his father, drawn to philosophy and French poetry. With the support of his mother, he rebelled against his father, planning a romantic escape to England.

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12 Stanton, G. R. "Marcus Aurelius, Emperor and Philosopher."
15 Albert Saloman’s introduction to the Enchiridion mentions that Frederick the Great carried a copy of the Enchiridion, as does Michael Evans in his article “Captains of the Soul”.
his friend and potential lover Lieutenant Katte. When his father found out about this, he captured and imprisoned his son, killing Lieutenant Katte.16

After this, Frederick fell back into line, working for his father as a military administrator, although during this period he became immersed in the Enlightenment, reading about classic Greek and Roman literature as well as corresponding with many Enlightenment thinkers, including Voltaire. One of the ideas that he was exposed to and eventually adopted was stoicism. In his writings, he quoted or referenced Marcus Aurelius and the ideas of stoicism multiple times, including changing poems to include lines from Meditations.17

However, Frederick was not originally a stoic thinker, instead being primarily an advocate for Epicurean philosophy, which unlike stoicism was focused on achieving pleasure in life. It was only when he became a military leader that he turned to Marcus Aurelius and the beliefs of stoicism, and even then, there is little evidence for a stoic or even philosophical approach to warfare or ruling in general. In 1740, Frederick William died and Frederick the Great took the throne. Less than 6 months later, Europe was thrown into conflict and confusion after the death of Emperor Charles VI and the question of who would succeed him and control Austria. Frederick offered to help Austria defend their land, if they would cede the province of Silesia to Prussia. On December 16th, 1740, when Austria refused his thinly veiled threats, Frederick invaded, launching the War of Austrian Succession, as well as a conflict between Austria and Prussia that lasted through the Seven Years War until the Peace of Hubertusburg in 1763 and the return the the pre-war status quo and balance of power.18 His military and diplomatic actions do not show a particular attachment to any type of philosophy, including stoicism, nor do his domestic policies, which were often quite restrictive and minimized political and social freedom, especially for lower classes, such as serfs. Similarly to Marcus Aurelius, his policies and actions show a pragmatic approach to gaining and maintaining power as opposed to the creation of dramatic reform.

18 "Frederick II, Known as Frederick the Great (1712–1786)." In Encyclopedia of European Social History, edited by Peter N. Stearns, 103-105. Vol. 6.
The role of the military has changed since the Roman or even early modern era. Military might is no longer as important in maintaining power, since methods of diplomacy tend to be more effective than brute force. Because of this the number of people involved directly in international warfare has greatly diminished. Many people in society feel no connection to the military, and especially in the United States, the military is no long a vital part of maintaining control of society and keeping the nation safe from outside invasion. Because of this, modern military scholars believe that there is a disconnect between the general population and the military, especially a disconnect of values.\(^{19}\)

In modern days, with nationstates that are much more secular and heterogeneous than many have been historically, it is often hard to identify a certain military doctrine based in morals. There is very little addressed directly to soldiers about the wars they are fighting and how they should conduct themselves morally. This shift from religion in government, where religious teaching could be used to guide soldiers, to the secular codes of ethics, which outline principles of just war, humanitarian action and legal requirements of military leaders means that there are fewer moral guidelines for individual actions.\(^{20}\) These ethic codes tend to be based in organization level rules and regulations as opposed to personal characters and morals, giving soldiers, both in low and high ranking positions, no framework to explain and understand their personal actions and morals. This can lead to individual acts of poor character or a organization wide sense of a lack of higher purpose beyond following orders they are given.

However, some individuals have found personal belief systems that give them a framework to understand the world, even when they face great hardships. James Stockdale was a fighter pilot in the Vietnam war when he was shot down and became a prisoner of war for several years. He had been a follower of stoicism for many years, since a professor introduced him to the Enchiridion, but during this period he relied heavily on stoicism to remain positive during his imprisonment and torture. Stockdale’s writings show that he truly believes in the philosophy he followed and used it to shape his view of the world. In his essay “Courage Under


Fire” he wrote “what Epictetus was telling his students was that there can be no such thing as being the “victim” of another. You can only be a “victim” of yourself”. Stoics believe that victimhood is a state of mind, not something that occurs based on external events, such as being a prisoner of war. This mindset can allow people imprisoned to retain a sense of dignity and meaning, even in situations designed to destroy moral and spirits.

This idea that victimhood is not something somebody else can inflict on you was one that allowed Stockdale to remain strong during his imprisonment. Keeping with the stoic belief that position and status in life, Stockdale writes that he had to adapt to the fact that he went from being an officer in the military to being “an object of contempt”. He writes that all he could do was adapt to this reality and not let it dishearten him. This idea of dignity and poise despite the hardships one faces is not a new idea. In the Enchiridion, Epictetus writes, “There are things which are within our power, and there are things which are beyond our power. Within our power are opinion, aim, desire, aversion, and, in one word, whatever affairs are our own. Beyond our power are body, property, reputation, office, and, in one word, whatever are not properly our own affairs”. Stockdale also writes about the torture that everyone in the camp had to endure and how he personally used the teachings of Epictetus to cope with the pain, even making the choice to disobey despite knowing it would result in more torture. “Epictetus said, “The judge will do some things to you which are thought to be terrifying; but how can he stop you from taking the punishment he threatened” That's my kind of Stoicism. You have a right to make them hurt you, and they don’t like to do that.” Stockdale relied on the teachings of stoicism to survive, but the role of stoicism and the works of Epictetus in the wider United States military is less certain.

Military scholars such as Michael Evans lament the fact that many modern militaries focus on technological and political improvements but “comparatively little is done to provide Western military professionals with sufficient moral philosophy to protect their own hearts and

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22 Stockdale, James B. COURAGE UNDER FIRE. Pg. 8.
24 Stockdale, James B. COURAGE UNDER FIRE. Pg. 15.
minds against the rigors of contemporary warfare.”

Evans believes that stoicism, especially the ideas espoused in the *Enchiridion*, can allow troops to understand the sometimes confusing and abnormal situations they are in and create a personal story or explanation for their lived experiences. This type of internal narrative is known to be effective at keeping people from internalizing or struggling with potentially traumatic events.

Evans believes that this change in the narrative soldiers construct around the experience of war offers a chance at improving moral and decreasing occurrences of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD. In his article, Evans quotes Brigadier General H. R. McMaster, of the U.S. Army, who says “Soldiers must view war as a challenge and as their duty, not as trauma.” McMaster and Evans both believe that by changing the narrative and thinking around war, the military can reduce the number of soldiers who develop PTSD. But despite writing about these benefits of stoic philosophy and how it could concretely help soldiers at war, Evans states that there is no philosophical basis for the military doctrine that currently exists for the US military and there is no teaching of philosophy to members of the military, even in a comparative or scholarly setting. Additionally, he writes that this philosophy is unlikely to be adopted in full by the military, which is understandable since there is no way to force people to believe in a specific philosophy.

All three of these examples bring to light the potential of using philosophy to explain, justify, or even guide personal action, but they also show the limits of philosophy in practical application, especially in a field such as the military. Despite the potential applications of stoic philosophy in the military, such as the idea that “this is your business—to act well the given part, but to choose it belongs to another” which matches perfectly with the hierarchical command structure of military groups, stoic philosophy has never been a driving factor or really

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25 Evans, Michael. "CAPTAINS OF THE SOUL"
26 This concept, known by psychologists as trauma narrative memory, impacts the way that people who survived trauma frame the event that they experienced. As researchers B.A. Van Der Kolk, and Onno Van Der Hart discuss in the journal article “The Intrusive Past: the Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma”, the narrative that people create around the trauma they experience impacts how much it impacts their lives and how well they cope with the event and the aftermath. A narrative of duty and honor can lead to a better outcome than one of fear and helplessness.
even a factor at all in the decisions of military leaders, even those like Marcus Aurelius and Frederick the Great who personally adhere to stoic teachings or groups where individual soldiers find strength from stoic teachings, as shown by the experiences of James Stockdale during the Vietnam War. As Epictetus says, “do you not make an exhibition before the ignorant of your principles, but of the actions to which their digestion gives rise”. 29 No matter what a person claims, their actions give a true picture of their motivations, and none of the military leaders cited as stoics show the influence of stoic philosophy in their leadership and policy.

29 Epictetus. "The Enchiridion." The Project Gutenberg EBook of The Enchiridion
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