LABYRINTH Vol. 23, No. 2, Winter 2021

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A Short Prolegomena to the Philosophy of War, in Four Problems

Abstract

Is something like a true "philosophy of war"—understood as a coherent system of ideas, or a clearly articulated theoretical posture adequate to fully addressing the enduring challenges of war on a properly philosophical register—at all possible? What follows is an attempt to outline, in four problems, the parameters of any future critique of a philosophy of war: the problem of categories*, the problem of* representation*, the problem of* violence*, and finally the problem of* peace*. It is argued that within each horizon delimited by these four problems philosophy encounters a potential limit, one that raises fundamental doubts regarding the cogency of any philosophy of war considered as a systematic enterprise.*

Keywords: Carl von Clausewitz, philosophy, war, warfare, violence, peace

1. Introduction

It is perhaps a truism that the experiences of war are intertwined inextricably throughout history with all human cultural activity, philosophy included, at virtually whatever particular corner of the historical landscape we choose to take into consideration. To focus just on philosophy, the examples abound, and not only in the West: there is Plato responding the the political disaster of the Peloponnesian War; the rise of Chinese classical philosophy in the wake of the devastation of the Warring States Period; the defense of just war in the Vedas of ancient India. The wars of the moment, if not always those of the past and the future, have rarely been far from the concerns of the philosopher. Given the apparent surfeit of such examples, one might be inclined to take as a corollary to this truism the assertion that, in order to understand a culture, its philosophy included, one would do well to consider how it has reacted to its wars.

Nevertheless, the truth of this truism, and any corollaries it might otherwise yield, holds only at a rather high level of generality, often rendering it all but useless. The specifics

are always more important, the appreciation of which usually leads one to cultivate a certain reserve when it comes to such truisms about the putative importance of war, either for culture broadly construed or more limited domains such as philosophy, even politics. For wars have not all been the same, just as little as the responses to them, which renders broad comparisons hazardous. However ubiquitous, war does not always prove to be as significant an influence as one might at first think: for every Plato, there is a Descartes who, war raging all around him for much of his intellectual life, did not seem particularly moved, much less influenced. We would perhaps do well to shy away from trying to pluck the fruit of such apparently low-hanging cultural universalisms, and instead focus on harvesting the more limited returns of local, particular investigations. As Husserl once put it, describing his own efforts in the domain of logical investigations early in his career, sometimes the pursuit of small change is the best course.

This is perhaps the prudent posture to adopt when it comes to historical reflection, whether in the history of philosophy or ideas generally. Yet it leaves unaddressed the evident need to grapple with the questions of war germane to the world in which we live today, that strange, uncertain configuration of social and political trends that has crystallized in the wake of the Cold War and the revolutions of 1989. As an example of what, expanding on a formulation of George Sorel, one can describe as the "problems connected with violence"[1], the enduring legacies of past wars and the reality of contemporary wars large and small continue to shape, in one way or another, the global human community, and thus represent a central political and spiritual challenge for our times.

But is philosophy the best means, or even among the best, with which to meet this challenge? Is what counts as philosophy today, that sometimes erudite, sometimes earnest and almost always culturally cloistered cluster of academic discourses, adequate to the task? Despite millennia of reflection on ethical life, there is little in the way here of obvious low-hanging fruit, especially once one learns to avoid repeating truisms that are easily dismissed. There are of course many philosophical interventions of enduring merit, from Machiavelli to Clausewitz to Aron, as well as a vast literature on just war theory, such that it would be disingenuous to claim that philosophy has been silent on the topic. Nevertheless, a rigorous, consensus-secured approach to the philosophy of war that treats the full complexity of the phenomenon is arguably still lacking.

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[1] G. Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, ed. J. Jennings, Cambridge 2004, 43.

This may not be a question of a mere lacuna to be filled, but instead a symptom of a deeper problem. For whether something like a true "philosophy of war"—understood as a coherent system of ideas, or a clearly articulated theoretical posture adequate to fully addressing the enduring challenges of war on a properly philosophical register—is at all possible may in the end prove to be a debatable proposal at best. In short, the attempt to articulate something like a philosophy of war requires a critique of philosophy itself, precisely in its application to the problems of violence in general, and to war in particular. Such a critique is necessary, in order to even begin to consider whether philosophy should enter the debate at all, risking not only the ire of a Rousseau, indignant at the repeated misuse of reason for the sake of such a sordid business, but the all-too likely prospect of once again falling far too short of a goal one had expected to be able to achieve.

Accordingly, what follows is an attempt to outline, in four problems, what would, in my estimation, have to be addressed in such a critique. The problems discussed below are meant to reflect, in part, salient and familiar issues in philosophical methodology generally, in part issues germane specifically to the problems of modern war, the wager being that their intersection might provide the basis for a critical impetus for orienting a reflection on war philosophy today. An impetus is the most that the following discussion can hope to achieve, since these ideas are still too undeveloped to carry any claim of being comprehensive.

The four problems to be discussed are: the problem of *categories*, the problem of *representation*, the problem of *violence*, and finally the problem of *peace*. In each, I will argue, philosophy encounters a potential limit, one which must be fixed critically in order to enter the *champ de bataille*, as it were.

2. The problem of categories

The very theme of war as an object of not only philosophical reflection is conditioned, often in unexpected ways, by the particular optics imposed on it by its many examples. This is compounded by the fact that even a recognized, standard conception of war or warfare often varies according to the circumstances of time and place. Shock infantry warfare has its ancient and modern analogues, but they are stubbornly distinct, given the historical differences in respective technology deployed, not to mention specifics of social organization that invariably determine the essential characteristics of all wars. Add or subtract the factor of mobility, and even within the same war the reality designated by the category of infantry combat varies

dramatically, as for example when one compares the Race to the Sea in September-October 1914 with the long slog of trench warfare that settled in after the First Battle of Ypres.

Accordingly, categories of war and warfare tend naturally to proliferate, following the descriptive demands of a wealth of forms, factors, and foci: there are the general forms of regular and irregular warfare and their respective subcategories; the factors imposed by the physical environments of land, sea, air, and their combination; the foci of information, psychology, economy, and other social aspects that map different dimensions of war as a total phenomenon. The manifold of conceptual and descriptive distinctions that results from the interaction of these elements, even if each given description proves to be in itself a perfectly cogent fit for a particular case, rarely fails to fully secure the integrity of a given overall categorial determination of war without at least some lingering ambiguity. War, in short, when looked at from the perspective of its conceptual determinations, appears to be in a state of perpetual revolution.

Perhaps the most illustrative of this tendency towards categorial proliferation, at least in modern times, is the concept of the partisan. Since the Napoleonic Wars, the figure of the partisan has been progressively transformed by a complex of shifting tendencies with regard to identity and forms of participation that render its formal inclusion in the category of "irregular warfare" all but empty. In response to the complexity of examples, the concept splinters in response to the descriptive demands of the moment, from the telluric, nationally loyal *guerilleros* in the Peninsular campaign and the "arming of the people" in the Prussian *Landsturm* edict in 1812, to the extensive use of the partisan as an arm of regular warfare in the Soviet advance during the Second World War and Mao's embrace of partisan warfare in his revolutionary struggle against both the Japanese and the Kuomintang. The contemporary political terrorist can be included as another chapter in this quickly moving history of transformations. The very concept of the partisan becomes so complex in the course of the 20th century, and in such a way that is deeply intertwined with central political and legal transformations, that Carl Schmitt believed it to represent a rich source for a robust theory of enmity, one that he saw in turn as a potential point of departure for a new concept of the political.[2]

Apart from the varieties of warfare, and the complications they invariably introduce, war itself as a general category is marked by a surface simplicity that often masks an underly-

[2] C. Schmitt, *Theory of the Partisan. Intermediate Commentary on the Concept of the Political*, trans. G. L. Ulman, Candor, N.Y. 2007.

ing complexity. Part of this is an inherent tendency towards ambiguity, one that sometimes frustrates our capacity to even identify a given case. It may be obvious that war is a struggle, but not all struggle is war; likewise war is often predicated on an act of resistance—Clausewitz, in a passage in *On War* that apparently tickled Lenin, defines the true act of war as one of defense, since the aggressor would be perfectly happy taking the prize without a fight[3]—yet not all resistance is war. Deciding just where either struggle or resistance becomes war is akin to the question of when an act of violence becomes political. For the one as in the other, the designation is often the result of a process that does not necessarily unfold simultaneously with the act, and involves various dynamics, whether political or social, that are germane to the context taken as a whole. Thus war is sometimes openly declared well after fighting has already begun, or not openly declared at all; sometimes war continues to burn in conditions formally defined as peace, as when English men-of-arms released from service continued to ravage the French countryside during the various periods of truce during the Hundred Years War. It is thus important to ask just when a war is a war, and not some other creature lurking just on the other side of an ambiguity.

Yet despite all this, on the purely conceptual level war can nevertheless be clearly defined. This however can only happen, as Clausewitz understood clearly, at the cost of considerable abstractness. The result can be a surprising simplicity ("war is an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will"), yet one that falls chronically short of the analytical force necessary for comprehending the full reality of war, which always entails the proper management of the ambiguities, exceptions, and complexities that rule in the domain of the concrete. In Clausewitz, the philosophy of war becomes effectively a double game, one that affirms the validity of a transparent if also abstract conceptual determination, all the while seeking to bridge the gap with the concrete reality of war that is anything but transparent.[4]

Compounding all of this is the fact that war is not a merely theoretical category, but a rhetorical concept that enjoys considerable use in political life. As such it is arguably most effective when eluding precision. Take for example the "war on drugs" that was such a prominent aspect of American foreign and domestic policy in the 1980's and 1990's. From a theoretical perspective, the war on drugs was perhaps not really a war at all, and maybe it was not

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[3] See R. Aron, *Clausewitz: Philosopher of War*, trans. C. Booker and N. Stone, London, 1983, 147–148. Cf. C. v. Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. M. Howard and P. Paret, Princeton 1976, 377.
[4] Clausewitz, *On War*, 75–78.

even genuinely considered to be one by its protagonists. Nevertheless, the rhetorical figure of war helped to justify politically an unusual deployment of military and diplomatic means in what essentially amounted to an international police operation. Something similar can be said about the more recent "war on terror," in which a similar strategy was augmented by the more conventional wars of Afghanistan and Iraq. Even the Cold War can be described along similar lines, though the example is vastly more complicated. The Cold War unfolded on a far more massive scale, also involved a mix of conventional wars (so for example the Korean War of 1950-1953 among others), but it still came down to justifying enormous expenditures towards the mobilization of military and diplomatic resources by characterizing the peace that took hold post-1945 as essentially a war fought by other means, thus again stretching the semantics of the concept of war for rhetorical and polemical purposes.

This rhetorical obfuscation of what might otherwise settle into conceptual clarity, at least in the abstract, is not illegitimate, but points to something essential. A reflection on war, even at its most rigorous, is never wholly neutral, but always dependent for its sense on a struggle with the meaning of those wars that have come to mark the times. If theoretical reflection, in its desire for transparency, seeks to bracket psychological and political motives for the sake of conceptual clarity and analytic stability, it only does so by also risking the severing of the very nerve of its functioning. In this way war is, to again quote Clausewitz, a chameleon,[5] and not just because of a certain practical indeterminacy that always marks its conduct, and which goes a long way to understanding its basic opportunistic character. War is a chameleon also because any decision about the *nature* of war is always caught between the competing demands to abstract from the moment, in the interest of conceptual clarity, and the ultimate necessity of responding to the exigencies of the concrete now, that constellation of forces, both material and social, to which it cannot remain indifferent. A theoretical reflection on war thus shifts uncomfortably between its polemical and scientific colors, like a chameleon attempting to escape notice.

This means that a proper categorial determination of war is, however otherwise a *desideratum* of the theoretician, never more than a idealization soon abandoned or at least distorted in the face of the demand to take stand in the moment. This means that any conceptually *pure* idea of war (e.g., Clausewitz's "absolute war") remains in itself useless when faced with such demands, for the actual wars we fight are always so many exercises in contingency,

[5] Clausewitz, *On War*, 89.

and the pure idea rarely governs polemics with any measure of efficiency. For it is precisely the peculiarities of the wars of the present and recent past, coupled with the likely challenges of the wars that we anticipate to come, that in the end provide the real motives for all our reflections. Such reflections are thus ultimately animated by a plurality of needs and impulses, such as the demand to recognize an immanent threat (whether in the form of rogue nations and leaders or the rise of ideological extremism), shift course in either strategy or tactics given recent transformations in warfare (as for example in the case of the so called "new wars," including information warfare), decide on the meaning of recent events, or rally moral indignation against a particular manner in which war is being conducted (or conducted at all). In this way war itself—the real and potential wars that face us—ultimately dictates thought.

This means that if something like a "philosophy of war" is to be at all possible, then it is only when we have forgone any comforts that are usually afforded by theoretical distance, and recognize that such a philosophy can only draw its ultimate sense from an understanding of the fight that is going on now, and situate itself accordingly. Though a purely conceptual determination might still have limited use as a point of departure, in the end there is no purely non-partisan, neutral discourse on war and warfare that would be capable of resisting the necessity of ultimately taking sides. If philosophy is going to hazard taking to the field, it must fight.

If this is the case, if philosophical discourse on war cannot be neutral, then more than the usual challenges of conceptual determination makes the potential role for philosophy in such reflections uncertain. Philosophy is at its best when it strives to be non-partisan, when it suspends the demands of the moment in favor of reflection, which can only happen by leveraging a skeptical *epoche* to cultivate the critical thoughtfulness that the world always strives to frustrate. A philosophy of war that would succumb to the demands of polemics at the expense of establishing at least some measure of autonomy, or non-identification with the present that Nietzsche once tried to express with the adjective *unzeitgemäß*, might very well prove a powerful means to articulate what is at stake in the moment, and with that perhaps even purchase influence with its rich conceptual distinctions, but only by compromising its very possibility as philosophy.

3. The problem of representation

Representation is a question of establishing a perspective on the object of inquiry or investigation that effectively articulates its constitutive features without undue distortion. It is accord-

ingly in the interest of any theoretician—whether philosopher, historian, sociologist, or military theorist—to find confidence in the veracity, cogency, and completeness of a particular representation of war. Often this is a question of what level or register to situate the description, which presupposes in turn an ability to distinguish rigorously such registers of description in the first place. One example is the classical distinction between the representation of a war with regard to the fortunes of a particular strategy adopted by the leadership, or that same war with regard to the tactics deployed by the commanders on the ground. This of course goes hand in hand with the need for conceptual definitions, in this case the respective definitions of strategy and tactics as such, which capture effectively the salient characteristics of different types of warfare, and so again we are led to the problem of categories.

Often such definitions, once drawn, can serve to organize representations into unities of what might otherwise seem to be very different things. So for example Clausewitz's definition of strategy as the use of victories, themselves secured at the level of tactics or the conduct of battle, to secure a political end, effectively fuses, on the level of representation itself, strategy with politics, in full continuity with Clausewitz's overall thesis that war is the pursuit of policy by other means.[6]

That war can be represented in a manifold of ways leads naturally to the question of which are the most truthful, capturing the reality of war "as it really is." The seminal work of the military historian John Keegan, *The Face of Battle*,[7] amounts to an extended argument that it is on the level of the experiences of those who fight that the reality of war is genuinely manifest, a reality that is at best dimly perceived on the level of the strategic perspective of the generals. Experiences of individual and collective suffering, burden, and effort not only bring to the fore the lived reality of war, but also serve to differentiate the salient characteristics of different wars across history, providing as it were a matrix of the varieties of the human predicaments of battle on which individual war-experiences can be plotted.

There are of course limits to Keegan's approach, as he would be the first to admit. War is a complex whole, and even a relatively typical experience of a war is never so widely shared that it would be satisfying to take it as definitive of the whole. This shortcoming becomes perhaps most acute when considering modern mass warfare, as Keegan himself does (brilliantly) with a description of the Battle of the Somme. The scale of modern warfare often

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[6] Clausewitz, *On War*, 177–178.
[7] J. Keegan, *The Face of Battle. A Study of Agincourt, Waterloo, and the Somme,* New York 1983.

confronts the analyst with something of which, arguably, no given individual participant possesses a complete grasp; its immensity itself is, in fact, a key characteristic of the experience. In general, it is one thing to compare the experiences of an ancient chariot battle in Central Asia with an infantry battle in ancient Greece, each of which forms (arguably) a distinct whole that can be taken to be more or less manifest on the level of individual experience. It is quite another to take either in comparison with the Western Front in the First World War, where the whole involved millions of combatants over hundreds of miles in a rolling series of engagements, large and small, over a period of years. This latter type of war even strains what might reasonably be called a distinct "battle," even if one drops individual experience as its measure. At some point the increase in scale leads to a qualitative shift that, even if it falls well short of rendering individual experiences irrelevant, forestalls taking them as constitutive of a sufficiently complete representation of war.

Something else goes with this. The increase in scale characteristic of modern war brings with it an increasing reliance on sophisticated means of representation in the very conduct of war itself. Historically this has involved, as has been argued by the literary historian Anders Engberg-Pedersen, the utilization of a wide variety of different media for the production of representation, perhaps the most significant, at least from the perspective of military history, being those of maps and games.[8] Campaigns involving tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of soldiers scattered over hundreds of miles of territory became, by the time of the Napoleonic Wars, increasingly reliant on the efficacy and practicality of maps. For a mode of warfare still tied to the limitations of the march and the pack horse, such maps not only had to mark the relative distances of various points, but also provide information on terrain and relative navigability. The more that scale pushes command decisions into the ether of map reading and the issuance of orders by courier often across large distances, thus spreading out the terrain of battle in both space and time, the more the particular conduct of war takes place in a milieu of pure representation and, accordingly, is shaped by it.

This remains true even when advances in technological capacity have overcome many of the physical and organizational obstacles that had originally pushed early modern warfare into its embrace of different media of representation. Overcoming one set of obstacles, for example the delay in communications or the deployment of forces rooted in the frictions of

[8] A. Engberg-Pedersen, *Empire of Chance. The Napoleonic Wars and the Disorder of Things*, Cambridge 2015.

time and space by way of instant electronic communications and the relative speed of mechanized transportation, only gives rise to others, so for example the need to respond in real time to events unfolding at multiple sites on the battlefield or theater of operations. The modern technical goal of "total battlefield awareness," or alternatively "battlespace awareness," in which an enormous amount of information of different types is synthesized into a stream of real time analysis, is a clear heir of the Napoleonic legacy of an increasing reliance on the technologies of representation.

Related to this is the increasing importance of games, another thesis of Engeborg-Pedersen's. His emphasis is on the capacity for games, as representations of war on both the level of tactics and strategy, to incorporate the element of chance. The general thesis is that one can interpret the embrace of games of chance by military theorists as evidence of an epistemic shift away from a classic, geometric representation of warfare, to one that seeks to recreate the experience of contingency, or war as that "empire of chance" that had struck military contemporaries as characteristic of recent events.[9] Games can also be credited with the power of modeling the reality of war, in ways that can be more or less exhaustive, or at least sensitive to the myriad complexities that make up the reality of battle or campaign. The more a model can incorporate such complexities, the potentially more powerful an instrument it becomes for the conduct of war.

Which brings us to the problem. Any modeling, in order for it to remain manageable, must be selective. Overload of detail, variations, and factors, however more content laden the representation that results and by that measure more valuable, risks simply mirroring the increasingly unmanageable confusion of mass warfare itself, ironically leading to the same results by replacing a lack of information with too much. Representation is useless if it only amounts to a mere compendium of information; information must be managed in a way that allows for appropriate decisions in the case of the protagonist, and opportunities to emphasize and provide insight in that of the theorist.

It is also worth emphasizing that the need for coherent representation is also a key factor in the inevitable political conduct of any war: the significance of the struggle, the very meaning of victory or defeat is mediated by a symbolism that is ultimately rooted in political discourse, and which must draw in turn from a given store of possible representations. Representation is thus a distinctively multidimensional affair. *How* war is represented—not only

[9] Engberg-Pedersen, *Empire of Chance*, esp. Chapter 4.

modelled with regard to its material elements, but determined and managed by way of its symbolic determinations, whether political, moral, or social—is thus not something external to the conduct of war, but an organic function of the same. What is at stake in representation is thus nothing short of the understanding of war itself, an understanding that is always already thoroughly conditioned by both the exigencies of fighting, and the success or failure to represent them.

Thus the challenge to philosophy is to both take account of the essential role played by the technologies of representation in the conduct of war, and in response fix a form of representation that is appropriate for properly philosophical reflection. Again there looms here a potential gulf between the ends of philosophy and those of war. For the selectivity necessary in the philosophical representation of war may turn out to be incompatible with the selectivity necessary for the conduct of war, for what the philosopher needs to see may prove incompatible with what the warrior, in order to fight, has made visible. This is a function of the need for philosophy to be able to determine the *meaning* of what we do in war, in a fashion that is independent of the prevailing standards for success that determine *what* we do in war. The philosophical necessity for a critical perspective on the latter, in order to orchestrate a determination of the former, requires a thoroughgoing liberation of representation, all the more difficult given that representation itself is an organic part of the reality of war, an essential dimension of its mobilization.

4. The problem of violence

A great deal of the activity of war takes the form of preparations—the massing of resources physical and human, the arrangement and selected concentrations of force dispositions, the securing of the battlespace or even its brute cognitive projection—that are often so intricate and energetic that it is often tempting to consider the violence of war as almost an afterthought. Clausewitz had looked with scorn on those who, perhaps inspired by the relatively limited, professional wars of the 18th century, put so much emphasis on the role of maneuver and other tactical devices such as interior lines that the actual use of violence was almost taken to be a sign of failure.[10]

[10] Clausewitz, *On War*, 130, 135–136.

This is of course an exaggeration. In a broad sense violence is arguably inscribed in all the activities of war, including its preparations, which after all ultimately serve to position oneself to be able to either strike the enemy, or husband the capacity to withstand a blow. This is as true in offensive preparations as defensive, in a strategy of annihilation as it is in one of attrition, none of which can be understood outside of the horizon of potential violence. It is even true in the case of nuclear confrontation. Even if the actual use of nuclear weapons had come, by the end of the 1960's if not before, to define the failure of nuclear strategy for both the United States and the Soviet Union, that never meant that their potential violence played no role. The race of the Soviets to increase megatonnage exponentially, and the use of these sinister measures of violence in subsequent diplomacy, is a case in point.

What characterizes the violence of war is thus, at least in part, a thoroughgoing grasp of the potentialities of violence, expressed in the form of war preparations and mobilization. Warfare is an art, a technique in which the instrumentalization of violence in all its forms stands at its inalienable core, its inner driving force. This is true of all the arts of war throughout history, from the martial arts in which the individual body is weaponized, to the mass mobilization of nations in the world wars of the past century, in which the social capacity for collective industry and symbolic production was weaponized on a massive scale. The violence of war is thus in this way constituted by a calculative intelligence coupled with an expanding knowledge of the possibilities of destruction that lie at the intersection of our vulnerabilities and our capacity to exert force, whether as individual bodies or collectives.

Yet for all our capacity for calculation and knowledge of how to destroy human beings individually and collectively, violence itself remains elusive. In the end, it is instrumentalized only in an indeterminate, incomplete fashion, for violence is never something that unfolds precisely as predicted, but on the contrary invariably opens up a space of hazard, of chance. "No other human activity," as Clausewitz put it, "is so continuously or universally bound up with chance."[11]

One reason for this is the simple fact that the best preparations and provisions for battle are inevitably subject to the vagaries of chance, to the unforeseen, which constitute what Clausewitz described as *friction*: that drag on action that results from the burdens of the unanticipated, complications in which any move is checked with an inexorable resistance charac-

[11] Clausewitz, *On War*, 85.

teristic of the environment of war.[12] War is a constant struggle with conditions: the weather, opportunities met and lost, psychological factors such as morale and courage, unanticipated political events, all the vagaries that dog the willingness to fight, and a chronic lack of adequate information. Thus, to again quote Clausewitz, it may very well be that "everything in war is very simple"—violence, in other words, is stupid—"but the simplest thing is difficult."[13] Thus even if the violence of war is to a very high degree instrumentalized, and that means both conceived and represented in increasingly sophisticated ways, the inevitable contingencies of conflict forgo the possibility of defining any real laws determining the conduct of war, apart from some general principles that are themselves chronically open for revision. War is thus an art, not a science; a discipline, not a body of knowledge that can be systematized.

Another reason that war is so bound up with chance is that the violence specific to war operates precisely in the caesura between the planned and the unanticipated, or that tipping point in which preparations run aground in friction. Violence is precisely an attempt to quicken this encounter, in a bid to shape events by way of distorting the environment in which they unfold in ways that frustrate the capacity of the enemy to retain control. For the act of violence is precisely the refusal to allow anything to be given as fully determinate or determinable, instead positing a radical refusal at the heart of things, an obstacle of mute force aimed directly at denying the attempt of the enemy to inhabit the field, or in general be in any predictable control of space or time. As a kind of willful anarchy, the violence of war is chronically blunt, risking the unraveling its own organization the moment it is deployed, in a gamble with an unknown that risks the one who wields it just as much as the one who resists. In this way the violence of war takes the form of a kind of planned confusion and exception, an orchestration of chaos aimed at the very capacity to field violence itself, namely the fighting capacity of the enemy who has entered the scene prepared to do the same. This means that the violence of war can never be reliably directed by any art of war, for the violent act initiates a breakdown the consequences of which cannot be determined in advance, only subjected to a shifting assessment of probability and the opportunistic instincts of the gambler. For this reason, the psychological or subjective dimension of war is of great importance for Clause-

[12] Clausewitz, *On War*, 119–121.
[13] Clausewitz, *On War*, 119.

witz, for it is on this level, not of understanding and technique but the more elusive "moral" dimension of character and will, that much of the drama is ultimately played out.[14]

We might also, in reference to the reflections of another thinker of violence, Jean-Paul Sartre, emphasize that the horizon of war violence is not only opened by the collision of an anticipation of a probable outcome and the anarchic moment of chance quickened by violence, but also the past legacies of violence that serve to shape, and often distort subjective comportment itself. The legacies of past wars, inscribed into what Sartre describes as the domain of the practico-inert, condition the reality of any war, perhaps to an even greater degree than the actual technologies of destruction deployed.[15] The *praxis* of past violence saturates the present, embedding itself deep in our psychology, giving a particular shape to the whole of our social relations. What we fear, what we are willing to risk, even what we can imagine to be possible, is a direct consequence of the history of destruction of which we are the troubled heirs.

This allows us to supplement in an important way the Clausewitzean emphasis on psychological factors: the point is not so much to catalogue the spiritual characteristics of an individual or collective (which often gets bogged down in empty speculation regarding the "warlike" or "unwarlike" character of a given society or individual), but instead to understand the historical context as the product of a confrontation between the realities of the past and the possibilities of the present. And it is here that the excesses of past violence stand out as poignant, but also ambiguous. Awareness of the violence of the past may lead either to a recoil of horror, giving rise to a desire to arrange the world in a way such that the crimes committed in the past will never again be possible. Yet it can lead equally to a reckless impulse to push forward even further, throwing the world into an ever greater chaos in an ever more costly gamble. Here perhaps we have an indication of the imaginative sources for the obscenity of war, its inherent tendency towards abomination, the breakdown of the very conditions of morality. Ironically, the same sources also yield an equally inherent tendency for wars to be limited affairs, falling well short of potential violence in the face of an instinct for self-preservation awakened by the memory of past suffering.

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[14] Clausewitz, *On War*, 85–86.
[15] J.-P. Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason, Volume One: Theory of Practical Ensembles*, trans. A. Sheridan-Smith, London 1991, "Book I: From Individual Praxis to the Practico-Inert".

Here lies the problem for philosophy. If anything, it is in its violence that something like the "essence of war" can be formulated, since violence appears to provide a key to the fundamental movement of war taken as a whole. Yet at the same time violence invariably points to the specter of an utter nihilism at the core of war, and with that at the core of any human situation that would count war past and present as one of its formative elements. There can be no philosophy of war, in other words, without a philosophy of nihilism. The problems of a philosophy of nihilism are copious, but with regard to the problems of war the issue boils down to one: is a philosophy of nihilism possible in any other form than as an *overcoming* of nihilism, a movement *beyond* nihilism? Or does the reality of an irreducible nihilism, whether in general or that of war itself, precisely the point at which philosophy is rendered impossible?

5. The problem of peace

The legacies of past violence, the practico-inert that arises from the distortions of past destruction, form a series of fundamental conditions constraining the very possibility of peace. Coupled with the character of war as prepared violence, any time of peace is fraught with the double distortion of past and anticipated violence: there is no peace that is neither a preparation for war, nor the failure to do so. The more humans are conscious of history, and with that the more they live historically, the more axiomatic this constraint.

Yet for all that it would be a mistake to conclude that peace lacks autonomy, that it is reducible to a tense truce that occasionally interrupts the reality of universal war, or that it merely represents war fought by other means. Something similar is the case with politics: Foucault's widely cited inversion of Clausewitz, that politics is war pursued by other means (because politics is power, and power an exercise of force), overlooks the core of Clausewitz's thesis, namely that war can never be an end in itself, but is always in the service of a greater political logic.[16] And the ultimate end of politics at play in war is not war, not power as an exercise of force, but an advantageous peace. For Clausewitz this implied a capacity for policy to judge appropriately the possible course, by means of either military action or diplomacy (or a combination of the two), towards the cessation of hostilities and a resumption of an agreed upon peace. Likewise that other popular attempt to replace Clausewitz's dictum, name-

[16] M. Foucault, "*Society Must Be Defended.*" *Lectures at the Collège de France 1975–76*, trans. D. Macey New York 2003, 15–16.

ly the riposte that war is not politics pursued with other means but the failure of politics, misses the point equally. There are of course plenty of cases where a failed policy results in a ruinous war, but bringing any war to an end is ultimately a political endeavor, so at some point the primacy of politics must reassert itself for the sake of peace, and it can do so only by again shouldering the war in order to conduct it to its conclusion.

In the end, the Clausewitzean insight is that war is never a complete *substitute* for politics, nor can it function independently from politics. A corollary might be that war is never a substitute for peace either, that however temporally brief, however threatened by the prospects of war, peace remains as the logical touchstone for any war, whereas the converse is not the case. To drive war and warfare beyond the confines of the logic of peace renders each incomprehensible, unmoored, effectively meaningless. Even a militarism that would seek to dress all of political discourse in the symbolic forms of war remains at least implicitly dependent upon peace for its own ultimate sense—otherwise it is madness.

Of course to claim something to be madness is not equivalent to demonstrating its impossibility. On the contrary. If anything, the legacy of the 20th century would seem to have affirmed at least the possibility of something like a "total war," a war that not only absorbs all of the resources of society but absorbs all of its symbolic activity, including politics, as well. Just as for Clausewitz the experience of the Napoleonic Wars seemed to have made the otherwise abstract concept of absolute war, or war driven inherently by an unmitigated escalation of possible violence, a reality, so too the long period of conflict between 1914 and 1945 seemed to have made the even more terrible specter of total war a reality as well.

Yet it remains a question whether or not this is just an appearance, whether or not the global conflicts of the last century are at bottom only conceivable in terms of a dialectic of war and peace that, however different it may be from the 19th (or any other) century, nevertheless remains valid. This seems to be the conclusion of Raymond Aron who, after his intensive study of Clausewitz, attempts to apply Clausewitzean principles in an analysis of the post-1945 world.

Aron's conclusion however runs up against a difficulty, one that I would argue is intrinsically philosophical. For it is difficult to judge just to what extent war and peace form a dialectic that can be meaningfully reconstructed in conceptual terms. There is good reason to doubt that there is a coherent perspective from which this could be accomplished. For each, war and peace, is grounded in an experience that seems to entail the unreality of the other, as if each exercised a kind of magical suspension that in and of itself does not necessarily open the horizon of its own modification. We do not necessarily return to war after a peace thanks

to which war means something different, more rich in content or determinacy; nor do we necessarily return to a peace after war to discover a condition that is any more resilient, as if tempered by the experience of war. We are more likely to be haunted by the unreality of the halcyone times of peace during war, and vice versa by the nightmare of war during peace, as if each represented an existential breach of the other that belies any claim that war and peace are two parts of a common, integrated whole. There may very well be developments, even dialectical in nature, that we can trace in the history of war as a human activity, but the idea of a dialectic between war and peace themselves, to the extent to which such a dialectic would entail some logic of unity, is at the very least an open question.

But for all that war and peace are clearly inseparable, even if, from the position of either, they seem to be absolutely, or perhaps fatefully separable: each reveals, in very concrete ways, the unreality of the other, and in this sense threatens a kind of contradiction without resolution. Here again we are perhaps faced with the need to recognize the place of nihilism. Here also lies the fundamental problem of peace for philosophy, which is at the same time just the problem of war itself: how to think each in terms of its other, and not emerge as a naive partisan of peace for whom war is a false reality ripe for eradicating from the world, nor a cynical partisan of war seeking to reveal the utter bankruptcy of peace.

6. Conclusion

Yet can philosophy be anything but a partisan of peace? Essaying the contrary would risk exposing ourselves to the ire of Rousseau—for would not anything short of defending the idea of peace amount to simple barbarism?

One might answer in the affirmative, at least if one were convinced that the conditions of peace are fundamental for the very possibility of philosophy itself. Our discussion of the first three problems above perhaps provides some support for this intuition. Philosophy falters when forced into serving the political ends of the moment at the expense of its autonomy; it also falters if it fails to liberate its representations from collusion in the conduct of war; and finally it falters if it is compelled to cede to nihilism a centrality in human affairs, at least without first putting up a robust, critical resistance. Are not all of these factors together pointing to an overriding necessity of peace for philosophy? Is it not only in the condition of peace that philosophy enjoys the requisite critical distance for any proper reflection on war and its violence—or any proper reflection at all?

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the fourth problem, that of peace, is the essential problem for philosophy, standing in the background of the other three, and any others that we might essay. An understanding of peace thus has the potential to provide the fulcrum for the entire endeavor of a "philosophy of war."

And here again doubts arise with regard to the very possibility of philosophy, even as a defender of the peace on which it seems to rely. For the problem of peace raises the essential question whether becoming a partisan of peace, in order not to become a lackey of war, does not itself risk a loss of autonomy, and with that the loss of a properly philosophical perspective. It is essential that we ask, as does Levinas in the first pages of *Totality and Infinity*, whether or not we have become the dupes of peace and its morality. "The moral consciousness," Levinas tells us, "can sustain the mocking gaze of the political man only if the certitude of peace dominates the evidence of war."[17] It is all too clear that such certitude often betrays a naïveté that is just as much an anathema to philosophy as its submission to the putative evidence of war and the politics that direct it.

In sum, any future philosophy of war must come to critical terms with its own conditions of possibility, which are discernible only in the complex relation between war and peace. For the ultimate problem of philosophy is but one expression of what is at stake in this relation: the human capacity not only to understand, but also to shape the world from out of this understanding, for better or for ill.

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[17] E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. A. Lingus, The Hague 1979, 22.