

A Rumor of Philosophy: On Thinking War in Clausewitz

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The aim of this paper is to understand the nature of Clausewitz's philosophical thinking in *On War* and its two-fold relation to the catastrophic event of the Napoleonic Wars and to Clausewitz's own reformation of a theory of war. In distinguishing between a philosophical and a military register of thinking—between a reflection on the nature of war and a theory of war—this paper examines Clausewitz's critique of 18th century military thought, the dialectical progression of this thinking in *On War*, and the “grammar” of war in its linkage of different definitions of war into a systematic whole. Against Raymond Aron's proposal to sever the connection between the three substantial definitions of war in the evolution of Clausewitz's thinking, this paper examines the conceptual progression of these three definitions within *On War*'s opening reflection on the nature of war. A closer examination of Chapter 1, Book 1, demonstrates the originality of Clausewitz's philosophical manner of thinking through the essence, or nature, of war from its apparently “straightforward” definition of war as a duel to the Platonic resonance of its concluding image of war as a “paradoxical trinity.” In this manner, Chapter 1 establishes a philosophical space for Clausewitz's development of a theory of war in the subsequent books of *On War*.

Keywords: war, philosophy, Carl von Clausewitz, Raymond Aron, *On War*, Napoleonic Wars, Fichte

“*Essence* is expressed in grammar. . . . Grammar tells what kind of object anything is.”

—Ludwig Wittgenstein

“War has its own grammar, but not its own logic.”

—Carl von Clausewitz

1

Penser la guerre, Clausewitz is the title of Raymond Aron's erudite study of the genesis and argument of Clausewitz's unfinished treatise *On War*. Through the effective use of a comma, Aron's title acknowledges the indispensability of Clausewitz's *On War* for “thinking war” in its totality on the basis of propositions and principles that would render transparent its political rationality and conceptual intelligibility. Clausewitz's guiding ambition was “to bring about a revolution in the theory of war,” as he notes in a celebrated

note from 1827, even though, as he proposes in an earlier note written between 1816 and 1818, his work offers only “material” for a theory, not a “complete theory” itself. Clausewitz’s premature death in 1831 would ensure that his seminal treatise remained, in his own words of premonition, “a shapeless mass of ideas.” Yet, even in this imperfect form, its originality remains as significant today for “thinking war” as when first published posthumously. As Clausewitz declared (1976: 63; hereafter *On War*): “It was my ambition to write a book that would not be forgotten after two or three years, and that possibly might be picked up more than once by those who are interested in the subject.”

A book that seeks “not to be forgotten” must necessarily think beyond its own historical context, and yet in the case of *On War*, it was the profound transformation of warfare brought about by the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars that incited Clausewitz to fashion a space of thinking that could reach beyond the very circumstances that engulfed it.¹ The legacy of a book “not to be forgotten” is nonetheless double-edged. The reception of Clausewitz’s *On War* is largely a history of constructing an image of Clausewitz’s thinking; its lean prose and unfinished construction further facilitated this historical tendency to package his thinking into to a handful of formulae and set-piece ideas of how war should be understood.² Against such a dominant form of reception, as amplified through the catastrophic conflicts of the 20th century, Aron proposed viewing Clausewitz anew through the prism of “thinking war.” As Aron remarks (1976; hereafter *Penser*): “J’ai lu *De la guerre* pour la première fois il y a une vingtaine d’années, puis je l’ai cité comme tout le monde. En 1971–1972, j’étudiais l’ensemble des écrits militaires, politiques, personnels de Clausewitz et crus constater que la pensée du plus célèbre des stratèges restait à découvrir et à comprendre.”³ One of the principal merits of Aron’s study is to approach *On War* as a thinking to be retrieved (and in the case of Aron’s own interpretation, through a meticulous historical reconstruction of its genesis) and re-activated, that is, as a thinking still to be fully thought through. A book that still remains to be “discovered and understood” is a book that still cannot be forgotten, and less for what we might think it has said, but for what it has yet to say, or, in the case of Clausewitz’s masterpiece, for how we might still learn what it means to “think war.”

The challenges for understanding the thinking of Clausewitz’s *On War* are nonetheless substantial. As routinely acknowledged in the extensive literature that has emerged since its publication, even in its most accomplished sections, *On War* lacks argumentative definitiveness and methodological transparency. As Martin van Creveld observes (1986: 35): “[*On War*] violates the rule of composition in that it offers no single, clear

1. For the importance of Clausewitz’s military experience for the development of his thinking, see Paret (2007), and, most recently, Stoker (2014). In this respect, it would be wrong to consider, as Berenhorst did, that “the most significant part of [Clausewitz’s] wisdom, he abstracted from the wisdom, the actions, and the maxims of Napoleon” (quoted in Gat, 2001: 208).

2. For the reception of Clausewitz in the 19th century, see Gat (2001).

3. “I read *On War* for the first time about 20 years ago and quoted from it like everybody else. In 1971–1972, I studied all of Clausewitz’s military, political, and personal writings and came to the judgment that the thinking of the most celebrated military strategist still remained to be discovered and to be understood” (my translation).

progression of thought, no well-defined ‘culminating point’ towards which everything strives, not even ‘conclusions’ succinctly summarizing the main points that it seeks to make.” Aside from the contingency of its unfinished condition, the challenge of navigating the conceptual topography of *On War* is further aggravated by its originality as both a philosophical attempt to “think war” (to understand the essence or nature of war as such) and a theoretical effort to educate military leadership for the successful waging of future wars. The pedagogical thrust of *On War* is thus hybrid: it seeks to teach how to think war philosophically so as to teach how to fight war militarily. With such a dual ambition comes a double risk of misunderstanding. As Alexis Philonenko astutely remarks (1999: 454): “. . . si l’auteur de *De la guerre* est sans doute trop philosophique pour les militaires, il ne l’est peut-être pas assez aux yeux du philosophe, qui jugera sa méthodologie sur bien des points insuffisantes.”⁴

The patent difficulty for a philosophical appreciation of Clausewitz’s thinking—my primary concern in this essay—begins with acknowledging that Clausewitz did not understand himself to be philosopher, even though he was philosophically minded as well as somewhat philosophically educated. In this liminal zone between philosophy and non-philosophy, one hears a *rumor* of philosophical thought in *On War*. Numerous have been the commentators who recognize certain patterns in Clausewitz’s thinking that are commonly identified as features of a “dialectical” method. Clausewitzian concepts are constructed around polarities that are set into motion, and these polarities function as dynamic elements within the development of a whole, or totality.⁵ The circulation of philosophical vocabulary within *On War* is likewise taken as a tantalizing indication of different possible philosophical influences. Hermann Cohen argued for the importance of Kant; Kiesewetter’s influence on Clausewitz’s thinking has been documented; and Hegel’s ever present shadow for Clausewitz’s generation has likewise been claimed as having left its mark on *On War*.⁶ In his critical survey of these proposals, Aron prudently concludes with a series of question marks regarding any substantial imprint of Hegel, Kant, or Montesquieu on the formation of Clausewitz’s thinking.⁷ This rejection of any specific influence does not fully dissipate the rumor of philosophy in *On War*, but, on the contrary, further heightens its intrigue. In Aron’s assessment (*Penser*, I: 371): “. . . on doit avouer que Clausewitz écrit dans un style philosophique sans rien comprendre à la philosophie.”⁸ Aron’s judgment seems to be of a lesser degree, but not of a different kind from Bernard Brodie’s observation that “in these opening pages [Chapter 1, Book 1] Clausewitz is using

4. “. . . if the author of *On War* is without a doubt too philosophical for military minds, he is not philosophical enough in the eyes of philosophers, who would deem insufficient his methodology on a number of points” (my translation).

5. Aron identifies three basic polarities (moral–physical, means–end, attack–defense) (*Penser*, I: 152ff.); see also van Creveld (1986: 37) and Terray (1999: 75).

6. Creuziger, 1883. For Clausewitz’s knowledge of Kant’s writings, see Paret (2015: 18–76) and (2007: 161ff.), and Stoker (2014: 91ff.). For a detailed account of Clausewitz’s debt to Kiesewetter, see Echevarria II (2007).

7. *Penser*, I: 360–371. Kiesewetter’s importance was missed, however, by Aron.

8. “. . . one must admit that Clausewitz writes in a philosophical style without understanding anything of philosophy” (my translation).

word-images made fashionable by the great German philosophers of his day, especially Kant and Hegel.” Whereas Aron considers Clausewitz as having understood nothing of philosophy, Brodie credits Clausewitz for having understood philosophy too well (*On War*: 643): “Fortunately, Clausewitz was of much too pragmatic fiber to lose himself either deeply or for long in this brand of idealism, but here as the curtain rises on his masterwork, this man who never graduated from a university enters wearing the gown of academe.” The philosopher (Aron) and the military strategist (Brodie) exhibit in their own manner the difficulty of positioning Clausewitz vis-à-vis his own thinking; both reduce the rumor of philosophy in *On War* to an appearance without substance (“style” and “fashionable word-images”).

2

On War is a thinking born of catastrophe. The Prussian defeats at the battles of Jena and Auerstedt in 1806 represented a humiliation that reverberated deeply within German intellectual circles. From a military perspective, the Prussian collapse during the seven weeks of Napoleon’s relentless campaign was historically unprecedented. In David Chandler’s words (1973: 502): “Seldom in history has an army been reduced to impotence more swiftly or decisively.” Clausewitz himself, who served under Prince August’s command at Auerstedt, registered in a letter to his wife, Marie, the traumatic experience of the defeat in 1806 in unequivocal terms: “. . . the sense of being beaten is not a mere nightmare that may pass: it has become a palpable fact . . .”⁹ This palpable fact received an influential philosophical interpretation in Fichte’s *Addresses to the German Nation* (1807–1808), which, much as with Clausewitz’s more slowly germinating treatise *On War*, responded to the perceived world-historical significance of Prussia’s defeat and the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation.¹⁰ As Fichte remarks in his First Address: “Time is taking giant strides with us, more than with any other age since there has been world history.” Fichte understands 1806 in no uncertain terms as marking the end of a world: “this era has entirely expired and ended.” Yet, this time of ending is a time of new beginning and promise for a new world order. As Fichte announces (2013: 7–8): “Should such a new world exist it would be the means of creating a new self and a new age for a race that has lost its previous self . . . and the purpose of these addresses is to demonstrate to you its being and its true proprietors, to bring a living image of it before your eyes, and to declare the means of its creation.”

Although not charged with the nearly Biblical aspiration of creating a new world, Clausewitz’s *On War* is likewise a response to the original catastrophe of the 19th century in the form of forging a new manner of thinking. *On War* is Clausewitz’s testimony to an event which haunts its genesis and argument internally (within its theoretical framework) and externally (within its historical context) through its most original and controversial

9. For a detailed account of Clausewitz’s service in the 1806 campaign, see Stoker (2014: 38–65); for the letter, see p. 54.

10. Dismantled by Napoleon in 1806.

proposition: the concept of absolute war. As Clausewitz notes (*On War*: 580): “. . . one might wonder whether there is any truth at all in our concept of the absolute character of war were it not for the fact that with our own eyes we have seen warfare achieve this state of absolute perfection.”¹¹ This appeal to witnessing the birth of a concept anchors *On War* to its singular historical situation while simultaneously opening the horizon for its thinking—for its conceptual testimony—beyond the event of its own inception. To think through an event—the advent of a new form of warfare—is to think beyond it in pursuing the full range of implications and consequences for what it means to think, and hence ultimately to practice, war. As Clausewitz remarks (*On War*: 580): “Surely it is both natural and inescapable that this phenomenon should cause us to turn again to the pure concept of war with all its rigorous implications.” This perfection of warfare is an historical *punctum* created by a “world historical individual,” to evoke Hegel’s celebrated designation of Napoleon. Whereas the generals under Fredrick the Great’s command and their opponents were guided by political aims and instructions, the opponent of Austria in 1805 and Prussia in 1806, as Clausewitz writes, was nothing less than “the God of War himself.” Napoleon’s genius is to have realized the impossible: to have perfected war in the absolute.

Emphasizing this constitutive relation between event and thinking, between Napoleon’s singular achievement and Clausewitz’s singular masterpiece, allows us to position *On War* with regard to the Napoleonic Wars as well as position the concept of absolute war—or better its function—within the thinking of *On War*. With respect to the latter, *On War* creates a space of thought meant to contain, in thinking through, the historical event of warfare’s perfected realization. The significance of this historical catastrophe is, however, two-fold. From a military perspective, and already beginning with the battle of Valmy in 1792, in the presence of which Goethe had declared: “From this place, and from this day forth begins a new era in the history of the world,” the defeat of Prussia, Russia, and Austria demanded the adoption of novel theories and practices of warfare. The following years, 1805–1809, witnessed the reforms of the Prussian Army under the leadership of Scharnhorst and Gneisenau and of the Austrian army under Archduke Charles.¹² Clausewitz, who was allied with the reform-minded establishment in the Prussian military, faults the military leadership in 1805, 1806, and 1809 (each campaign culminating in decisive French victories: Austerlitz, Jena/Auerstedt, Wagram) for their failure to adapt to the changing pace and means of Napoleon’s new way of warfare.¹³ As he remarks, “Such a transformation of war might have led to new ways of thinking about it,” and the fact that it

11. Clausewitz continues (*Ibid.*): “After the short prelude of the French Revolution, Bonaparte brought [warfare] swiftly and ruthlessly to that point. War, in his hands, was waged without respite until the enemy succumbed, and the counterblows were struck with almost equal energy.”

12. For Prussian military reforms in light of the “cognitive challenge” of 1806, see the insightful Paret (2009).

13. It is here interesting to remark that Clausewitz does not make mention here of Napoleon’s 1807 campaign against Russia, the Russian defeat at the battle of Friedland and the Treaties of Tilsit. This omission further stresses the Germanic (Prussia and Austria) orientation of Clausewitz’s concern and intended audience in this passage.

did not is clearly suggested as an Allied military *and* political failure, on account of which Napoleon continued unfettered with his impressive military successes (*On War*: 583).

This demand for “new ways of thinking” carries another distinct meaning. In addition to its military implication, Clausewitz suggests that the military revolution brought about by “the God of War” calls for a philosophical revolution with regard to understanding the nature of war as such. The new way of thinking in *On War* is, in other words, not limited to a new military thinking with regard to questions of strategy and tactics, nor even in terms of a novel cognitive epistemology of war—all of which are indeed central to the project of Clausewitz’s thinking.¹⁴ These theoretical reflections in *On War* must furthermore be understood in relation to Clausewitz’s studies of various campaigns during the Napoleonic Wars, since it is with the historical analysis of individual and actual conflicts that Clausewitz demonstrates how his general propositions and principles were to have been applied in instances when they were not. More fundamentally, however, one finds a philosophical register of thinking in *On War* which reflects the two-fold significance of the Napoleonic Wars and Clausewitz’s dual roles as participant and witness, as an engaged military staff officer and as an educator in his capacity as an instructor at the Prussian War College in Berlin. As with Fichte’s *Addresses to the German Nation* and its emphasis on the critical function of philosophical education for the renewal of Germany and its world-historical mission, Clausewitz understands his own pedagogical mission as inseparable from cultivating a philosophical register of thinking.

This dual character in Clausewitz’s thinking, operating in both a philosophical and military register, finds concise expression in his critique of Heinrich von Bülow’s scientific approach to warfare and like-minded military theories, which would reduce war to “algebra on paper.” In *Geist des Neueren Kriegssystems* (1799), von Bülow fashioned systematic principles for a “science of war” (*Kriegswissenschaft*), as opposed to merely an “art of war” (*Kriegskunst*), by means of a “geometrization” of the purported rules governing an army’s engagement along its lines of operation. Von Bülow’s proposal for a “science of war” stems from his conjecture that the discovery of such a scientific system of war would in fact render war pointless (*Zwecklos*): given that armies are equally trained on the tactical level, if confronting armies were equally informed about the scientific principles governing strategy, victory of one party over another would effectively be rendered impossible (von Bülow, 1835: xiv). One is here reminded of the zero-sum game of tic-tac-toe in the 1983 film *WarGames*; in a comparable vein, von Bülow argues that war would be an unwinnable game if both parties followed an optimal strategy. Clausewitz’s rejection of von Bülow’s “science of war” reveals his rejection of the kind of military theory espoused in *Geist des Neueren Kriegssystems*. In opposing von Bülow’s prescriptive system of war, Clausewitz does not just formulate alternative views regarding questions of strategy, tactics, and other military topics; he presents instead a different conception of what a theory of war requires as a philosophical foundation. We can rightly speak of Clausewitz’s *On War* as a philosophical critique of war in the loosely Kantian sense of establishing the

14. For example, as insightfully argued in Engberg-Pederson (2015).

limits and capacities of an activity (“thinking” for Kant, “war” for Clausewitz) which inherently, when left unguarded and unknown with regard to itself, tends towards the unconditioned, thus exceeding the bounds of reason itself. Reason, much as war in Clausewitz’s argument, is this paradox of self-restraint and excess, of moderation and extreme. And much as with Kant’s critique of reason, Clausewitz’s critique of war will turn on demonstrating both the inherent “dialectical” movement within war that leads it towards an extreme (“absolute war”) and what Clausewitz calls the “braking” or “delaying” principles (*retardierende Prinzipie*), or “counter-poises” (*innewohnende Gegengewichte*), that inhibit war from its perfected realization. A critique of war must, much as with a critique of reason, find clarity (and, in this sense, “self-knowledge”) with regard to war’s proper ends and means, and thus avoid the confusion or contamination of one with the other. Napoleon’s new form of warfare awakens Clausewitz from his dogmatic slumber and thus awakens a reflection on war to its genuine subject-matter and purpose.

In contrast to von Bülow and other military theorists of his age (e.g., Jomini), Clausewitz does not begin his treatise *On War* with a “theory of war,” but begins with a set of reflections on “the nature of war.” The distinction between “Nature of War” (Book 1) and “Theory of War (Book 2) distinguishes his philosophical reflection on war from his military consideration of strategy and tactics.¹⁵ As Clausewitz remarks at the beginning of Chapter 1, Book 1, he does not want to begin with a “pedantic” and “literary” definition; he begins instead by “going straight to the heart of the matter;” in other words, he begins with the nature of war. This reflection on the nature of war in Book 1 opens the space of thinking for the development *On War*. Clausewitz thus creates the conceptual space, or topography, in which he situates his own theory of war without thereby mechanically deriving his theory of war from his preliminary philosophical thinking. The sense in which Book 1 is the foundation for his own thinking is not to be conflated with it as a foundation for the derivation of or “justification” for his theory. Instead, as Clausewitz makes clear, these opening reflections provide a constant point of reference (*Blickrichtung*), or better: an orientation, for the theory of war developed in Books 2 to 7. As Éric Weil argues, it is in this sense that *On War* develops a “genuine philosophy of war,” not in terms of philosophical principles that would usurp genuine military theory nor in terms of a military theory constructed from rigid principles and prescriptions, but in the sense of providing a foundation for a military theory of strategy and tactics in a reflection on the nature of war as such (Weil, 1971: 223). As an immediate consequence, the concept of theory becomes in turn transformed. As Weil remarks (Ibid., 221): “Clausewitz veut comprendre la nature de la guerre, et s’il élabore une théorie, elle a pour but précisément de libérer la pensée stratégique des entraves des ‘théories.’”¹⁶

This liberation of theory from theory finds clear expression in yet another facet of Clausewitz’s rejection of von Bülow. In a tacit reference to *Geist des Neueren Kriegssys-*

15. Compare, for example, how von Bülow begins his treatise in Section One with a consideration the “basic principles of the basis of operations.”

16. “Clausewitz wants to understand the nature of war and if he elaborates a theory, it is precisely with the aim of liberating strategic thinking from the obstacles of ‘theories’” (my translation).

tems, Clausewitz writes in a note written about 1830 (*On War*: 71): “It is a very difficult task to construct a philosophical theory for the art of war, and so many attempts have failed that most people say it is impossible, since it deals with matters that no permanent law can provide for.”¹⁷ Although Clausewitz stridently rejects any conception of theory based on “permanent laws” and “inflexible plans” which would make war as coming “from a machine,” he nonetheless argues for “a whole range of propositions” and seeks to extract a structure of intelligibility from the diverse manifestations of war as well as from the complexity of war’s total phenomenon. Such propositions richly populate Books 2 to 7 of Clausewitz’s *On War*, and must not be considered as “analytic” propositions, but rather as “synthetic” propositions in a loosely Kantian sense of reflective judgment. As Emmanuel Terray observes (1999: 55), reason in Clausewitz is a combinatorial activity of thinking about the heterogeneity of the real in order to act upon it.¹⁸ Whereas in what Kant termed “determinate judgment,” a particular is subsumed to a universal, in “reflective judgment,” the universal must be found for the particular, which, for Clausewitz, requires what he calls “the tact of judgment.” As he remarks: “Here the activity of the understanding leaves the field of rigorous science, i.e., logic and mathematics, and becomes, in the larger sense of the word, an art, i.e., the ability to find in a confused mass of elements and relations the ones that are most important and essential to using one’s tact of judgment.”¹⁹ This emphasis on “the tact of judgment” is reflected in the literary composition of *On War* and Clausewitz’s frequent, often brilliant use of pithy propositions and analogies which approach aphorism. In this regard, Clausewitz’s style in *On War* is less “philosophical” and more akin to the scientific prose found in Lichtenberg with its threads of vivid images and metaphors woven into a tapestry of propositions and principles. The pedagogical function of this aphoristic leanness of prose is meant to reflect the premium placed on the exercise of the tact of judgment in war’s context of uncertainty, chance, and human failings.

3

Clausewitz’s unfinished masterpiece presents the reader with a collection of puzzle pieces that seemingly do not construct an unified image. The reasons for this “shapeless mass of ideas” have been indicated above: the dynamic character of Clausewitz’s thinking; the unfinished condition of his manuscript; the challenge of reconciling the “universal thirst for clarity” and “orderly scheme of things” with the “chameleon-like character of war”; and the relation between the singularity of Napoleon’s perfection of war and Clausewitz’s singular effort to bring about a “revolution in the theory of war,” i.e., in thinking war. A principal difficulty, however, which runs through these various factors is the basic challenge Clausewitz identifies for the construction of a “philosophical theory,” namely, to find the

17. Howard and Paret’s translation erroneously translate *philosophische* with *scientific*.

18. Weil also emphasizes the collapse of the distinction between theory and practice (1971: [x]).

19. For a contrast between Clausewitz’s “tact of judgment” and Kant’s “reflective judgment,” see Engberg-Pedersen (2015: 76ff.).

intelligibility that pervades the heterogeneity of the real. This form of intelligibility must be both dynamic and systematic, i.e., it must integrate different elements into a whole.

In *Penser la guerre*, Clausewitz, Aron identifies three “constellations” (or “definitions”) in *On War* and raises the issue of how to understand their systematic relation and conceptual compatibility. Although this issue of how to understand the relation between these three substantial definitions of war do not exhaust how to understand Clausewitz’s conception, or “thinking,” of war, it is an issue that compels a clearer understanding of how Clausewitz understood the relation between “concept” and “experience,” and the grammar of his thinking, its systematic progression and unfolding. The first constellation defines war as a duel that inherently mounts towards an extreme pitch of reciprocal violence; it is with such a notion in mind that Clausewitz coins the expressions “absolute form,” “pure concept” or “abstract concept” of war. A second definition is found in Clausewitz’s 1827 note, where a distinction is drawn between two kinds of war depending on its objectives: to over-throw the enemy or to occupy frontier-districts. For Aron, this second definition recognizes a spectrum of wars, and hence, the conceptual distance between “absolute war” and actual wars, and the polarity between violence and dialogue, military action and diplomacy. A third definition is identified with what Aron labels *la Formule*, “war is the continuation of politics by other means,” and the idea of the “paradoxical trinity” found at the end of Book 1, Chapter 1. This definition establishes the “logic” of war in terms of its subservience to political aims and motivations. In this celebrated “formula,” politics can exercise either a moderating or accelerating role; as either curbing the intrinsic progression of war to an absolute pitch of violence, or as adopting the means of violence for the pursuit of political ends. In each instance, however, the violence of war is a means towards a political end, not an end in itself, and hence, defined by political rationality and judgment. Whereas the aim (*Ziel*) of war is the destruction of the enemy forces, the goal (*Zweck*), and hence, the point, of war is political. The importance of this “mature” definition of war is stressed repeatedly by Aron. War’s diversity reflects the diversity of political aims and the three tendencies which can come to dominate the direction of a war as seen through the prism of the “paradoxical trinity” of the military establishment, the government, and the people.

Aron’s solution to the conceptual puzzle of how to understand the relation between these three definitions, and hence fulfill Clausewitz’s ambition to “think war” systematically, turns on a historical claim concerning the genesis of Clausewitz’s thinking and an interpretative strategy of decoupling what he considers Clausewitz’s “mature” view from his earlier definition of war. To this end, Aron speaks of Chapter 1, Book 1, in which the third definition comes to expression, as “Clausewitz’s spiritual testament.” This definition of war as the continuation of politics by other means entails, on Aron’s reading, a rejection of the first definition of war as a duel that moves unchecked towards an absolute pitch of violence, and which represents (for Aron) an earlier and discarded view in the development of Clausewitz’s thinking. This notion of “pure” or “absolute war” is interpreted by Aron as an “abstraction” and “irreal notion” that functions as a Weberian ideal

type. Indeed, Aron even speaks of the concept of pure war as “philosophical” in a pejorative sense: as only “pertinent in the world of concepts and abstraction.”

Aron’s historical reconstruction and understanding of the relation between concept and experience, absolute war and actual wars, need not detain us further here, and has been critically examined elsewhere (Terray, 1999: 51–83). Nor is the complex question of how to understand the meaning of “politics” (*Politik*) and “continuation” (*Fortsetzung*) in Clausewitz’s thinking (or in Aron’s reading) to be developed here. Instead, an alternative interpretation of the relation between the three substantial definitions of war in Clausewitz’s *On War* can be pursued internally within the progression of Book 1, Chapter 1—Clausewitz’s “spiritual testament.” Contrary to Aron’s dismissal of Clausewitz’s “philosophical style,” if we take seriously the rumor of philosophical thought in *On War* and examine the progression of thinking in Book 1, Chapter 1, we find a conceptual linkage among the three definitions of war that does not separate one from the other (against Aron’s strategy of decoupling); one recognizes instead a certain grammar of thinking through war in its dialectical complexity. Following a suggestion by Éric Weil, we can identify two basic philosophical concepts that anchor the development of Clausewitz’s thinking, totality and polarity, to which, contrary to Weil, one should add a third, means and ends.²⁰ The relation between these three concepts is itself structured by totality and polarity: the total phenomenon of war is generated through polarities. Weil, however, sets aside the question of how Clausewitz arrived at this dialectical conception of thinking. As he writes: “Comment Clausewitz est arrivé à cette dialectique de la réalité historique—car c’est bien de cela qu’il s’agit, et au sens la plus strict—c’est une question qui ne doit pas nous préoccuper ici: on peut toutefois dire qu’il n’a guère eu de formation philosophique et que, en particulier, il ne semble pas avoir connu la pensée hégélienne” (Weil, 1971: 224).²¹ Regardless of its possible sources and motivations, this dialectical movement operates immanently within the progression of thinking in Book 1, Chapter 1, and, more specifically, establishes a series of conceptual linkages among the three definitions of war.

4

It is, in fact, just such a description of what it would mean to “think war” that Clausewitz proposes in the introduction to the philosophical opening of *On War* in Chapter 1, Book 1, when he writes: “I propose to consider first the various elements of the subject, next its various parts or sections, and finally the whole in its internal structure” (*On War*: 75). In a note written about 1830, Clausewitz remarks that “the first chapter of Book 1 alone I regard as finished. It will serve the whole by indicating the direction I meant to follow everywhere” (*On War*: 70). This first chapter presents a progression of thought that

20. According to Weil, the concept of means and ends “ne sont pas philosophiquement fondamentaux” (1971: 225).

21. “How Clausewitz arrived at this dialectic of historical reality (since it is in fact here a dialectical method in the strict sense) is a question that should not concern us here: one can note, however, that it did not receive a philosophical formulation and that, in particular, it does not appear that he knew Hegel’s thinking” (my translation).

moves from “the simple” to the “complex,” and, in so doing, exhibits a progress of thinking that moves towards war as “total phenomenon.” This progression of thought links together “grammatically” different “definitions” (different puzzle pieces) of war, thus delineating the contours of the nature of war as such. In this manner, the linkages of different “moments” or “definitions” of war provide a clue to the question of the compatibility of different definitions of war which has often been debated by commentators, including, most recognizably, by Aron.

The first definition of war introduced by Clausewitz at the beginning of Chapter 1, Book 1, “goes straight to the heart of matter” in stressing from the beginning and as the most basic, or “simple,” basis for a reflection on the nature of war, the essential form of war as fighting, or armed conflict.²² War, Clausewitz here understands, is “a duel on a large scale.” Within the progression of Clausewitz’s thinking in Chapter 1, this definition of war is the most simple, which, over the course of this thinking, becomes more complex. We find not only the movement from “the simple” to “the complex,” but also, from “parts” to “whole.” This definition of war is not only methodologically speaking “straight-forward,” it is also historically speaking the most classical, even though Clausewitz will inflect this definition in a manner that establishes the measure for this departure from this traditional definition by generating his notion of absolute war from the inherent dialectical movement within reciprocity of interaction in a duel.

In *The Rights of War and Peace* (1625), for example, Hugo Grotius likens war between two states with a duel between two individuals. As Grotius observes, the Latin word *bellum* is derived from *duellum*, which in turn stems from *duo* “and thereby implied a difference between two persons.” In keeping with this image and historical definition, Clausewitz underlines that war as a duel (*Zweikampf*) is the employment of physical, violent force to compel another’s will. We find here a clear echo of the conception of war as conflict between two sovereign states. Referring once again to Grotius, as he remarks in *The Rights of War and Peace* (III, iii, XI): “. . . war is not the PRIVATE undertaking of bold ADVENTURERS, but made and sanctioned by the PUBLIC and SOVEREIGN authority on both sides.” Within Clausewitz’s progressive unfolding of this dyadic encounter, if force is a means to compel an adversary’s volition, it implies that war serves a political demand, namely, that the point or end (*Zweck*) of war is not the destruction of the enemy, even if this might be its aim (*Ziel*), but the recognition of our will and political demand as a law or command. The enemy’s will is compelled to “fulfill” our will: “*Der Krieg ist also ein Akt der Gewalt, um den Gegner zur Erfüllung unseres Willens zu zwingen.*”²³ The aim of war is to impose our will on the enemy, yet this imposition requires that the enemy accept this imposition, or, in other words, that a political act brings war to an end (a treaty), much as a political speech-act is required to declare war. This insistence on the political meaning of victory is repeatedly stressed by Clausewitz in his reflections on war plans in Book 8.

22. On the importance of this point through-out Clausewitz’s development, see Gat (2001: 205).

23. “War is therefore an act of violence for the purpose of compelling the adversary to fulfill our will” (my translation). For an emphasis on this point, see Thivet (2010: 167).

What leads the further unfolding of this initial statement of the definition of war as a duel is, however, not its tacit political implication, but the sense in which the means of violence is governed by its own “grammar.” This grammar of war is organized around the insight that war is an activity structured dynamically in terms of reciprocity and interaction (*Wechselwirkung*). Whereas the political implication of the definition of war as a duel remains muted at this preliminary stage, the inherent dynamic of war is explored through three figures of interaction which collectively account for the inner excitation, as it were, of the concept of war to a self-perfected realization. The definition of war as a duel thus introduces the distinction between means and ends, and this distinction quietly structures the development of his thinking: once the inherent grammar of war as means has been examined, Clausewitz will return to a more precise definition of war in which war is more explicitly and emphatically subsumed to its proper end, not its own activity, but political ends. At this beginning stage of development, what is important here that the structure of political recognition is based on a structure of reciprocity (*Wechselwirkung*) which operates, when considered in abstraction from “counter-poises,” independently. The thesis is central: “War is an act of force, and there is no logical limit to the application of that force.”

Clausewitz advances, in fact, a double and mutually reinforcing claim: the application of war is logically unrestricted and the activity of war tends towards extremes due to the reciprocity of interaction. As René Girard here emphasizes, violence breeds violence as adversaries increasingly resemble each other in pursuing their ends through violent means. According to the principle of conflictual mimesis, adversaries become doubles for each other in focusing on each other, not their own objectives; in this manner, violence breeds a violence which blinds the participants to the object pursued through a mimetic fixation with the other. The movement towards extremes, on this reading, is proportional to the resemblance of adversaries to each other (Girard, 2007: 39ff.). Clausewitz identifies three forms of interaction. War is a paradox where the pursuit of control (to compel the adversary to fulfill one’s will) exposes itself to a situation beyond one’s complete control, but in the case of these forms of interaction which drive war to the extreme, the loss of control is due to the inner excitation, as it were, of the very concept of war itself as an activity. Clausewitz here likens these three forms of interaction to laws that would govern forces in a vacuum: “. . . a clash of forces freely operating and obedient to no law but their own” (*On War*: 78). When considered purely as a concept, war is “stupid,” not because of its instrumental value (which only becomes so defined once forces no longer obey their own laws), but because war in this pure dialectical unfolding towards extremes is “senseless” precisely because it operates with no purpose other than its own self-realization.²⁴ At this pure register of consideration, war is pure self-expression: its activity expresses only itself in its reciprocal progression towards perfection. Clausewitz’s suggestive image of an exploding mine to figuratively express war’s instantaneous, or better, spontaneous self-propagation—as an ideal or pure concept—underscores the senselessness of war left

24. For a different sense of “the dupe of violence,” see Dodd (2007).

unto itself.²⁵ It has a grammar, but no logic. This inherent stupidity of war in its pure concept is at the same time a lure, or temptation. As Clausewitz remarks (*On War*: 78): “If we were to think purely in absolute terms, we could avoid every difficulty by a stroke of the pen and proclaim with inflexible logic that, since the extreme must always be the goal, the greatest effort must always be exerted.” The implication here is that we might be tempted to consider that “the extreme must always be the goal” of war if we succumb to the “logical fantasy” of conflating the pure concept with the real concept. But insofar as the human mind is, contrary to Clausewitz’s optimism, *likely* “to consent to being ruled by such a logical fantasy,” it stands to reason that the pure concept of war opens the possibility for the contamination of politics through its own chosen means of war when such a means becomes unmoored, as it were, from any political logic. Political ends are never immune to the ardor of combat which contaminates both the ends and means of war. Heinrich Heine shrewdly speaks of “an eagerness for battle which combats not for the sake of destroying, nor even for the sake of victory, but for the sake of combat itself” (2013: 159).²⁶ Politics is perpetually exposed to the risk of being eclipsed by the violence it itself unleashes and legitimates.

This elaboration of the pure concept from war from the initial starting point of a definition of war as a duel brings into view the polarity between the “abstract” and the “real,” the pure concept of war and relative concepts of war, namely, relative to the pure, abstract concept. This passage from the first definition and its conceptual development to the second definition does *not* signal, however, a rejection or suspension of the first. Clausewitz identifies what he terms “counter-poises” (*innewohnende Gegengewichte*) which moderate and punctuate the realization of war: human psychology, the asymmetry of attack and defense, and change. The material realization of war (space and time, human psychology, and contingency) accounts for the irreducible gap between absolute war and actual war, as well as the gap between intention and execution within an actual war (Terry, 1999: 64). The dialectic of war can thus be understood as the interplay and tension between two opposed tendencies: materialization and de-materialization. Whereas the first reflects the “retarding principles” or “counter-poises” that moderate or inhibit the self-expression of war as absolute, the latter can be considered as the primary objective of military technology, espionage, and other applications of intelligence in war: to overcome or counter-act the counter-poises that inhibit war’s movement towards extremes.

Clausewitz reiterates, however, that the extreme of war is not a “theoretical requirement,” and thus, once seen to be a pure notion, becomes “no longer feared nor aimed at, because it becomes a matter of judgment what degree of effort should be made; and this can only be based on the phenomena of the real world and the laws of probability” (*On War*: 80). It is significant that Clausewitz introduces here the centrality of judgment (the tact of judgment noted above) immediately after his proposition that “in war the result is never final.” Judgment here enters the scene of thinking simultaneously with a transition

25. Clausewitz resorts to this metaphor again when describing both the French Revolution and the catastrophe of 1806 in Book 8.

26. His observation is with regard to the Vikings and “that ancient German eagerness for battle.”

to an explicit consideration of the political dimension of war. Indeed, as he observes: “A subject which we last considered in Section 2 [in Chapter 1] now forces itself on us again, namely the political object of the war” (*On War*: 80). Casting a glance back to Clausewitz’s point of departure with his “straightforward” definition of war as a duel in Section 2, Sections 3–10 can be seen as developing the inherent grammar of the nature of war in abstraction—without considering its political dimension, or object, namely, to compel the adversary to fulfill our political will. As Clausewitz notes, this political objective has thus far been “over-shadowed” by a focus on the grammar, or laws, of war. With this re-appearance of the political object of war from its initial appearance in Section 2, i.e., the definition of war as a duel, Clausewitz tacitly introduces the basic schema for what he will soon explicitly articulate in *la formule*, when he already declares here: “The political object—the original motive for the war—will thus determine both the military objective to be reached and the amount of effort it requires” (*On War*: 81).

Clausewitz considers a question that at first sight might seem insignificant or obscure: whether military operations can ever be interrupted for a moment, yet notes that “the question reaches deep into the heart of the matter.” The “heart of the matter” here is once again the relation between the pure concept of war and real, or relative, war. Unlike a mine which explodes to the extreme, war does not unfold according to a strict causal chain (i.e. according to laws of physical necessity); although it does possess an intrinsic mechanism of self-expression governing by its own laws, war is distributed, or, in other words, schematized, in space and time; real wars are discrete events, not an unbroken and incessant series of actions. The three counter-poles lead Clausewitz to his crucial insight that “war is further removed from the realm of the absolute and [this makes] it even more a matter of assessing probabilities” and that “no other human activity is so continuously or universally bound up with chance.” War is an art, not a science.

After this progression through two different, yet conceptually linked, constellations or definitions of war (war as a duel; war as a polarity between absolute war and real war), Clausewitz’s thinking arrives at what he calls “a more precise definition of war” and culminating with *la formule*; war is the continuation of political policy by other means. The consequences of this point is two-fold: war is not autonomous, but an instrument; wars are diverse given the diversity of political ends, and hence, the diverse manifestations of exertion and effort in war. The final consequence, however, for a theory of war, hence establishing the transition to Book 2, is the recognition of war as a “total phenomenon.” Looking back to the first definition of war as a duel, we have arrived by way of the “parts” to “the whole,” and through this progression, both the grammar and political logic of war has been thought through, yet thought through in such a manner that we are given an orientation or *Blickrichtung* for the development of a theory of war. The task set forth through this philosophical critique of the nature of war for a theory of war—and hence: for the practice of war—are delineated by the contours of war as a total phenomenon, or what Clausewitz calls “the paradoxical trinity,” in both an objective and subjective sense: people/hatred and enmity/blind instinct; the play of chance/creative spirit/commander and army; reason/politics/sovereignty. We are reminded here of the tripartite division of

the soul and the *polis* in Plato's Republic. This philosophical concept of the soul of war, in both its "objective" and "subjective" meanings (as political and psychological in Platonic senses) opens the space and sets the challenge for a theory of war. As Clausewitz writes: "Our task therefore is to develop a theory that maintains a balance between these three tendencies, like an object suspended between three magnets."

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Философский слух: понимание войны в сочинениях Клаузевица

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Задача статьи — прояснить природу философского мышления Карла фон Клаузевица, которое он продемонстрировал в книге «О войне» (1832), а также проанализировать отношение этого мышления, с одной стороны, к драматическим событиям Наполеоновских войн, а с другой — к той ревизии теории войны, которую Клаузевиц осуществил. В статье проводится различие философского модуса мышления и модуса понимания войны, свойственного военной теории (различие между философскими задачами понимания природы войны и задачами теории войны). Это позволяет мне исследовать критику Клаузевицом военной мысли XVIII века, диалектическое развитие философского мышления в «О войне», а также «грамматику» войны в связи с различными определениями войны как часть цельной системы. В отличие от Раймона Арона, который предлагал исключить наличие связей между тремя содержательными определениями войны в эволюции идей Клаузевица, в статье я исследую концептуальное развитие этих определений в рамках рассуждения о природе войны, которым начинается сочинение «О войне». Более подробный анализ первой главы первой части этой работы позволяет увидеть особенности метода философского мышления Клаузевица, который рассматривает сущность войны, или ее природу, начиная с «прямолинейного» определения войны как дуэли и завершая образом войны как «парадоксального триединства» (в соответствии с Платоном). Таким образом в первой главе обозначается философское пространство, которое позволяет ему продолжить развитие теории войны в последующих частях своего сочинения.

Ключевые слова: война, философия, Карл фон Клаузевиц, Раймон Арон, «О войне», Наполеоновские войны, Фихте