

*Editor's note:* This special column of the *Journal of Military Ethics* highlights important historical contributions to the ethics of war, peacemaking and military affairs. In this issue Director of the Centre for Defence Studies, King's College London Dr. Paul Cornish considers ethical dimensions in Carl von Clausewitz' (1780–1831) seminal work: *On War* (1832).

## BENCHMARKS

# Clausewitz and the Ethics of Armed Force: Five Propositions

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**The work of Carl von Clausewitz continues to provoke heated debate. For some scholars, Clausewitz's *On War* remains indispensable to serious thought on the resort to war in the modern period. Others, however, see Clausewitz's work as either outdated, or a morally repellent argument for unlimited, unrestrained and brutal warfare. This essay argues not only that Clausewitz's work continues to be relevant to discussions on the use of armed force, but also that *On War* provides a framework for ethical reflection on war and its conduct. Two main preoccupations of western military academies and staff colleges—Clausewitz on the one hand, and the just war tradition on the other—can complement, rather than rival each other. *On War* creates a space for reflection on the use of armed force, and for that reason if no other, should still be considered an important resource for contemporary students and practitioners of strategy.**

KEYWORDS: Clausewitz, military ethics, armed force, just war.

## Problems with Clausewitz

The early nineteenth-century writings of the Prussian general and military thinker Carl von Clausewitz provoke enthusiasm and contempt in equal measure. Among Clausewitz's supporters are those who regard his seminal (and unfinished) *On War* as a milestone in western political philosophy. In the late 1970s the English philosopher Philip Windsor described Clausewitz's *On War* as 'the only work of philosophic stature to have been written about war in the modern period' (Windsor

1977: 193). At about the same time, in an introductory essay to what has since become the standard edition of *On War*, Bernard Brodie wrote 'His is not simply the greatest but the only truly great book on war' (Brodie 1976: 53). Before altering his opinion of Clausewitz rather fundamentally, Martin Van Creveld gushingly described *On War* as 'the eternal treasure of the human spirit' (Van Creveld 1986: 48). More recently, the strategist Colin Gray has taken up the cause of Clausewitz, describing *On War* as 'the gold standard for general strategic theory' and its author's insights as 'intellectually inescapable' (Gray 1999: 112).

Critics of Clausewitz fall largely into two camps. First, there are those who regard Clausewitz's work as morally repellent, as advocacy (whether explicitly or implicitly) of unlimited, unrestrained brutal warfare. The twentieth-century British strategist, Basil Liddell Hart, notoriously described Clausewitz as 'the Mahdi of mass and mutual massacre' and 'the source of the doctrine of "absolute war", the fight to the finish theory' (Liddell Hart 1957: 57). Liddell Hart's claim (albeit later moderated) was that the effect of Clausewitz's work on European strategic thought was to diminish the moderating and legitimising role of politics, and perhaps even to remove political restraints from the equation. For Liddell Hart and other critics who equated Clausewitz with the disproportionate and inhumane military practices witnessed during the First World War, Clausewitzian strategy was pursued with at best a diminished sense of political proportion, and encouraged the military means to consider itself an end in its own right. Taking up the theme, the British military historian John Keegan recently described Clausewitz's work as 'pernicious', through its presentation of war as a 'value-free activity' (Keegan 1999: 42). Latterly, Mary Kaldor has argued that *On War* has had a crowding out effect on moral reflection on war, 'supplanting concepts of justice, *jus ad bellum*, drawn from theology' (Kaldor 2001: 17), and offering a secular and state-centric rationale and legitimacy for the resort to war.

Another group of critics begin from the observation that Clausewitz's analysis was based on a very narrow, socially and historically unique experience: Napoleon's mass warfare in early nineteenth-century Europe. Furthermore, Clausewitz's work reflected assumptions—principally regarding sovereignty and the state's monopoly prerogative on the legitimate use of armed force—which are now more contested than accepted. For all these reasons, the claim is made that Clausewitz has too little to offer to students of early twenty-first-century international politics with its diffusion of actors, and to students (and practitioners) of modern armed conflict where non-state armed forces have an important role and where the 'political' and the 'military' are not simply held in a relationship—however close—but are fused into one. Martin Van Creveld has been at the forefront of this critique of Clausewitz, offering the prospect of 'non-trinitarian' warfare (i.e., warfare which does not conform to Clausewitz's Westphalian-style 'trinity' of people, army and government) (Van Creveld 1991). Keegan argued that Clausewitz missed the point altogether, and could not avoid doing so:

Clausewitz was a man of his times, a child of the Enlightenment, a contemporary of the German Romantics, an intellectual, a practical reformer, a man of action, a critic of his society and a passionate believer in the necessity for it to change. [. . .] Where he failed was in seeing how deeply rooted he was in his own past, the past of a professional officer class of a centralised European

state. Had his mind been furnished with just one extra intellectual dimension—and it was already a very sophisticated mind indeed—he might have been able to perceive that war embraces much more than politics: that it is always an expression of culture, often a determinant of cultural forms, in some societies the culture itself (Keegan 1993: 12).

As in any good debate, there are also those who question the more dogmatic interpretations of *On War*, of whatever persuasion. Michael Carver noted how '[*On War*] quickly became, and has remained ever since, the strategist's Bible; and, as with the Bible, quotations can be found in it to suit all tastes and to justify conflicting opinions' (Carver 1982: 15). And in his introductory essay to the Princeton edition of *On War*, Michael Howard warned against reading too much into *On War*, or expecting more than Clausewitz intended to give: 'It remains the measure of his genius that, although the age for which he wrote is long since past, he can still provide so many insights relevant to a generation, the nature of whose problems he could not possibly have foreseen' (Howard 1976: 43).

The contention of this brief essay is that, in spite of the vehement criticism of Clausewitz as amoral (at best) and dangerously outdated, *On War* does indeed make valuable contributions to the debate on the morality of the use of armed force, and for that reason if no other, should still be considered an important resource for contemporary students and practitioners of strategy. This might appear to be a particularly difficult argument to make. Clausewitz is, after all, popularly perceived to be a soldier, a state-centred realist, an historicist, a scientist, a pragmatist, a technologist, a theorist of warfare; anything but a moral philosopher. What is more, it seems clear that Clausewitz himself was unwilling to dwell for too long on such matters. At one point in *On War* he asks whether 'mankind at large will gain' from the advent of 'people's war' and from 'war itself', but seems content that the answer to such questions should be left 'to the philosophers' (Clausewitz [1832] 1976: 479).

Yet in spite of his bloodthirsty popular image, and in spite of his own reticence in the matter of morality, several scholars have sensed an ethical dimension to Clausewitz and his work. Certainly, there is occasional evidence in *On War* of a moral conscience at work: 'Battle is the bloodiest solution. While it should not simply be considered as mutual murder [...] it is always true that the character of battle [...] is slaughter, and its price is blood. As a human being the commander will recoil from it' (ibid.: 259). On this basis, Colin Gray, for example, notes that while Clausewitz 'certainly had ethical views', these views 'played no formal role in the development of his general theory of war and strategy', adding almost wistfully: 'It is a limitation upon his enduring value that Clausewitz's culture cannot recognize war itself as an ethical question' (Gray ibid.: 106). Michael Ignatieff detects a more explicit morality at work in *On War*, arguing that Clausewitz 'believed that violence ought to observe certain moral proprieties: His vision of total war did not include the indiscriminate slaughter of civilians or the murder and torture of prisoners. Such practices, he assumed, were beneath a soldier's dignity' (Ignatieff 1998: 116).

Encouraged by such glimpses of the moral Clausewitz, the aim of this essay is to show not only that there are moral dimensions to Clausewitz's work, but also that *On War* is relevant to current debate on the ethics of the resort to armed force.

The aim of the essay is emphatically not to revolutionise the scholarship on Clausewitz by ‘outing’ him as an ethicist, but simply to rebalance the debate somewhat. The essay is structured around five ‘propositions’.

## Proposition No. 1: Clausewitz and the Enlightenment

John Keegan, we have seen, describes Clausewitz as a ‘child of the Enlightenment’. Azar Gat makes a similar observation, describing Clausewitz as a ‘true child of his time’. But Gat goes further, attributing to Clausewitz a ‘political and ethical outlook’ which expressed the historical, cultural and intellectual context—the evolving German national consciousness of the early nineteenth century—in which he worked, thought and wrote (Gat 1991: 237). This context was one in which Enlightenment arguments for humanitarianism and cosmopolitanism would not have been unfamiliar, least of all to *sceptics* of such universalist moralising, such as Clausewitz. As an antidote, Clausewitz developed a moral view which steered clear of what he saw as the deficiencies and dangers of cosmopolitan liberalism, and which responded to the awakening of the German national and state consciousness that was taking place around him. Clausewitz set himself the task of ‘exposing reality as it actually was, as against liberal illusions’ (ibid.: 241), in the process becoming an advocate of the ‘German conception of the state’, which itself was based upon a number of assumptions:

By and large, the state was the framework in which civilized communities developed; internally, the state was the higher and unifying expression of communal life; externally, owing to the natural dynamics in a society of sovereign entities, the interaction between states was governed by considerations of *raison d'état* or *Realpolitik*; within such a framework of relations, war had an integral part (ibid.: 239).

This position is neither, necessarily, non-ethical, nor anti-ethical. For Clausewitz, it was the state that made order, society and civilisation—and perhaps even ethics?—possible. It was the limitations and inadequacies of the international environment in which the sovereign state existed, which made it all the more necessary for the state to be physically robust and morally coherent. In a foretaste of nineteenth-century social Darwinism, war—and all that went with it—could even be seen as a positive preference, if it made for a more spirited society and one more fit to struggle and survive.<sup>1</sup> Of course, this all begins to sound uncomfortably like militarism; ‘a form of moral particularism that systematically excludes universal

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<sup>1</sup> Gat (ibid.: 243). Gat quotes a telling passage from *On War*: ‘Today practically no means other than war will educate a people in this spirit of boldness; and it has to be a war waged under daring leadership. Nothing else will counteract the softness and the desire for ease which debase the people in times of growing prosperity and increasing trade. A people and nation can hope for a strong position in the world only if national character and familiarity with war fortify each other by continual action’ [Clausewitz, *On War* 192].

values and ruthlessly subordinates the good of humanity to the good of a particular race, state or nation' (Coates 1997: 41).

Yet whatever else he was—German nationalist, political realist—Clausewitz was not a militarist. The goals of militarism are realised sufficiently by the maintenance and use of armed force; there is a preference for war in itself, which goes beyond a mere willingness to consider war if in the interests of the state, or an uneasy acknowledgement that on occasion war might be necessary and unavoidable. The military means are preferred, not only instrumentally in order to achieve certain ends, but also non-instrumentally as an end in themselves: 'For militarists war and the "war community" have an intrinsic, and not just an instrumental, value' (ibid.: 69). It is this merging of means and ends which is so different from Clausewitz's model, to which I return below, in which military means and political ends are in a close relationship but nevertheless distinct, and in which the former emphatically does not take precedence over the latter: 'Subordinating the political point of view to the military would be absurd, for it is policy that creates war. Policy is the guiding intelligence and war only the instrument, not vice versa. No other possibility exists, then, than to subordinate the military point of view to the political' (Clausewitz *ibid.*: 607).

*Proposition No. 1*, therefore, is that it is precisely because Clausewitz was a 'child of the Enlightenment', and because he was so conscious of the intellectual currents sweeping across Germany and Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, that he cannot be said to have ignored, or even to have been unfamiliar with discussions then underway concerning the morality of the use of armed force.

## Proposition No. 2: Clausewitz, the State and War

Clausewitz's best-known assertion is that 'war is not a mere act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political activity by other means' (*ibid.*: 87). Broadly, there are two ways in which to interpret this dictum: either Clausewitz intends to liberate war from the untidy and inconvenient constraints of politics, by redefining war as 'normal' politics and thereby harnessing politics to the cause of war; or Clausewitz intends that war should forever remain captured within and constrained by politics. The second of these interpretations is the more accurate.

Andreas Herberg-Rothe argues that much of the criticism of *On War* is a quarrel with an intellectually incomplete Clausewitz in awe of Napoleon's military triumphs, particularly his overwhelming defeat of the Prussians in the campaign of Jena–Auerstedt (October 1806). Witnessing Napoleon's later defeats in Russia (1812), at Leipzig (October 1813) and finally at Waterloo (June 1815) brought Clausewitz to a more durable and sophisticated conception of war as a political act, and as an act which is and should be limited (Herberg-Rothe 2001: 177). Clausewitz's best known definition of war is cited above, a less sophisticated version of which appears later in *On War*, in which war is 'simply a continuation of political intercourse, with the addition of other means' (Clausewitz *ibid.*: 605). In the more sophisticated definition, appearing in the 'only revised and completed part of the whole work' (Herberg-Rothe *ibid.*: 178), the reality of Napoleon's defeat is felt more keenly, and the importance of the political–military relationship conveyed more

directly. As Herberg-Rothe explains, ‘In his analysis of this war campaign [Napoleon’s escape from Elba and defeat at Waterloo], [Clausewitz] formulates the proposition that war was a “modification of political transaction”, the accomplishment of political plans and interests by means of battle’ (ibid.). In Clausewitz’s conception, war begins in, is rationalised by, and in the end must return to political discourse and decision-making: “The political object is the goal, war is the means of reaching it, and means can never be considered in isolation from their purpose’ (Clausewitz *ibid.*: 87). In other words, Clausewitz insists that political discourse is *not* suspended when war breaks out, but continues to shape and constrain the conduct of warfare. However difficult to maintain in practice, the normative significance of this insight is very great indeed. Van Creveld writes of Clausewitz’s best-known aphorism: ‘As a description of the way things are it is very often anything but correct. The lower down the war-making hierarchy we proceed, the less true it becomes’, but only after having first observed, almost grudgingly, ‘As a prescription of the way things should be the truth of the dictum is undeniable’ (Van Creveld 2002: 12). But when war begins and ‘other means’ are employed, something, which clearly could not be described as ‘normal’ politics, has begun. What, then, of the function of politicians and policy when these ‘other means’ are being used? Here, Clausewitz’s prescription works in reverse. While generals should advise—rather than overwhelm—the political process, so politicians should resist the temptation to think of themselves as effective military commanders: ‘Policy, of course, will not extend its influence to operational details. Political considerations do not determine the posting of guards or the employment of patrols’ (Clausewitz *ibid.*: 606).

*Proposition No. 2*, then, is that in the Clausewitzian model of strategy, as represented in *On War* and other works, although ‘policy’ and ‘military’ are discrete provinces, war brings these two elements together in a balanced, constitutive relationship. This relationship not only contextualises politically, and explains the resort to armed force and the conduct of military operations, it also sets clear limits on the scope of political management of such operations.

### Proposition No. 3: Clausewitz and the ‘Trinity’

Clausewitz saw in war a ‘remarkable trinity’, comprising ‘primordial violence, hatred, and enmity’, ‘the play of chance and probability’, and ‘subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to reason alone’ (*ibid.*: 89). As Heuser notes, this ‘primary’ trinity reads across to a ‘secondary’ trinity, whereby violence is the concern of ‘the people’, chance and probability the concern of ‘the commander and his army’, and policy the concern of ‘the government’ (Heuser 2002: 56). Clausewitz’s idea of the trinity (or, as Heuser argues, the *secondary* trinity) has provoked trenchant criticism among some of his modern critics. Martin Van Creveld argues that in place of major conventional war between states, the world is witnessing the rise of non-traditional or ‘non-trinitarian’ armed conflicts such as those seen in Aceh, Afghanistan, Chechnya, Congo, Kashmir, Sierra Leone and so on, and in 9/11. What is distinctive about such conflicts is that they offer little or no evidence of a formal, finely balanced relationship between people, armies and governments. These so-called ‘low-intensity’ conflicts are far more bloody and

interminable than the relative lack of military capability on the part of the belligerents would at first indicate, and that vast, technologically sophisticated armed forces are incapable of bringing such conflicts to resolution:

Instead of returning to the basics and asking what makes men fight, [people] continue to parrot Clausewitz on war being the continuation of politics by other means. Instead of coming to terms with war as a messy, bloody clash in which people are bound to be injured and killed, they send in bombers and cruise missiles in the hope that technology may obviate the deaths and make the injuries unnecessary (Van Creveld *ibid.*: 9).

Other writers are less willing to abandon the trinity. Villacres and Bassford, for example, see Clausewitz's (primary) trinity as 'the theoretical capstone of Clausewitz's entire work': 'It is the trinity's capacity to encompass so much of the nature of war, and so much of Clausewitzian theory, that makes it such a valuable, if complex, analytical tool' (Villacres and Bassford 1995: 18). Like Handel (1996: 63), Callum sees the primary and secondary trinity as two parts of the whole. Callum argues that as such the trinity is a valuable tool with which to examine US strategy and operations during the Gulf War of 1991. While noting that the United States 'achieved a great military victory', Callum argues that the US nevertheless 'suffered a greater political defeat. This defeat was caused by the lack of a coherent, thoughtful strategy in the three realms of war that together define the Clausewitzian trinity: violence, chance and politics' (Callum 2001: 59).

*Proposition No. 3* is that Clausewitz's trinity is a device that creates space for ethics. Put another way, the trinity provides a means by which to attach a degree of ethical reflection to Clausewitz's political–military relationship and his theory of war. There are two aspects to this idea of an 'ethical trinity'. First, what Clausewitz advocates in the trinity is, in effect, a sophisticated system of checks and balances where the organised use of armed force is concerned. The trinity separates the relevant functions or powers, and the proper use of armed force then becomes a matter of balanced, mutually constitutive co-operation between the separated elements of people, army and government; a 'dynamic relationship' (*ibid.*: 67). With such a system, it is easy to see that armed force and war cannot become an end in themselves. By being held 'accountable' to such porous and mutable ideas as the will of the people and the policy of the government, armies and their commanders, however much professional capability and 'genius' they demonstrate, can nevertheless be judged and driven by standards and values over which they have no control. Second, Clausewitz's trinity can reasonably be interpreted in such a way that it is not too far removed from the principal constituents of the just war tradition. By this argument, Clausewitz's 'ethical trinity' is made up of the following elements:

- *The raw capacity of people and soldiers to act violently and destructively;*
- *Tactical and operational judgements by military commanders and individual combatants as to how and when violent capacity should best be used;*
- *Political and strategic judgements by governments as to whether and why violence should be used.*

## Proposition No. 4: Clausewitz and the Just War Tradition

Clausewitz was not a theorist of the just war tradition, with its *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*. Yet in two ways, *On War* complements the structure and application of just war thinking, suggesting a degree of methodological compatibility between the two, if nothing more. The first concerns the relation between means and ends, and the second Clausewitz's conception of the political–military relationship as being layered and hierarchical.

Clausewitz wrote of war as 'a serious means to a serious end' (Clausewitz *ibid.*: 86). And elsewhere in *On War*: 'The political object is the goal, war is the means of reaching it, and means can never be considered in isolation from their purpose' (*ibid.*: 87); and 'No one starts a war—or rather, no one in his senses ought to do so—without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it. The former is its political purpose; the latter its operational objective' (*ibid.*: 579). This sense of means and ends being held in balance is developed by Gat: 'The relationship between political aims and military means was, of course, not one-sided. The means had to suit the ends, but the ends too could not be divorced from the available means [...] A continuous interplay exists between the aims and the means' (Gat *ibid.*: 244). This is strikingly similar to aspects of the just war tradition, as observed by a number of scholars of that subject. McMahan, for example, describes the just war tradition as dual in nature, embodying 'a theory of ends and a theory of means' (McMahan 1994: 386). In *Just and Unjust Wars*, Walzer observes that justice of war, or *jus ad bellum*, and justice in war, or *jus in bello* are 'logically independent' (Walzer 2000: 21). While it would certainly be possible in war to satisfy just one or other set of criteria—by fighting an unjust war according to the rules of *jus in bello*, or by satisfying *jus ad bellum* but then fighting disproportionately and without discrimination—to qualify as a just war, both standards must be met. Compliance with just one set of criteria (either means or ends) cannot be allowed to compensate for failure in the other. 'The just war tradition', notes Coates, 'upholds the moral determination of both the recourse to war and the conduct of war: the *jus ad bellum* and the *jus in bello* carry equal weight in that tradition' (Coates *ibid.*: 98). Walzer, again, makes a related point when he refers to 'the *dualism of jus ad bellum and jus in bello* [my emphasis]' (Walzer *ibid.*: 21).

Military planning and activity which concentrated on means without considering ends, and vice versa, would in Clausewitz's terms be nonsensical. Similarly, moral reflection on warfare cannot be fully represented in either dimension to the exclusion of the other. Neither *On War* nor the just war tradition are prescriptive as to the method or the outcome of this means/ends balancing; they simply insist that in military practice as in moral reflection, it must be carried out by those involved.

*On War* and the just war tradition also share a structure of overlapping levels of activity, organised hierarchically. Clausewitz did not intend *On War* to be a guide to Prussian army field operations, or a tactical doctrine manual, but a means with which to reflect upon and understand the nature and purposes of the whole breadth of the activity known as war. In book six, chapter eight of *On War*, while discussing 'Types of Resistance', Clausewitz divides the activity of war spatially and temporally, and then into three overlapping areas of activity—country/war, theatre of



operations/campaign, position/battle (Clausewitz *ibid.*: 379)—which correlate closely with the division of warfare into strategic, operational and tactical ‘levels’ taught in western military academies and staff colleges (Franz 1986: 172). Once again, structures and ideas can be found in the just war tradition which complement the model presented in *On War*. Johnson’s description of the purposes of the just war tradition conforms not only to the strategic/operational/tactical model, but also to Clausewitz’s trinity of government, commander and people:

A guide to statecraft

- Theory of the use of force by the political community
- Understanding of the moral qualities of political leadership
- Protection of fundamental rights and values
- Relation of ends to means in political life

A guide to commanders

- Relation of military command to authority/purposes of political community
- Understanding of the moral qualities of military leadership
- Protection of fundamental rights and values in situations of armed conflict
- Moral limits on means and methods in conflict situations

A guide to the consciences of individuals

- Claims on moral consciousness of individuals at all levels of political and military life
- Definition of responsibility in relation to the use of force by the political community
- Definition of the individual’s rights and responsibilities in the use of force (Johnson 1999: 26).

*Proposition No. 4*, therefore, is that the Clausewitzian model and the just war tradition are in important and useful respects functionally compatible, in that both are a reflection on practice rather than a guide to it, both are concerned to seek a balance between means and ends, and both adopt a broadly similar layered structure.

## Proposition No. 5: Clausewitz and Individual Moral Responsibility

*Jus in bello*—moral reflection on the means to be used in war—is central to Western notions of justice and restraint in warfare. Plainly, the principal agent for *jus in bello* can only be the individual combatant. Certainly, many other agencies and individuals are involved in framing the laws of armed conflict and broader operational law, and in devising rules of engagement, but what matters morally (and militarily) about means is their application, and in both respects this is the province of the soldier, rather than the distant political (or, indeed, military) leader. Just as the foundation of western strategy, military thinking and effectiveness is the soldier’s ability and willingness to exercise his professional judgement, so an

essential component of the western moral project is the capacity of that same soldier to make moral judgements and decisions, and even moral mistakes.

Particularly in books three and five of *On War*, Clausewitz stresses the importance of the morale and physical well-being of soldiers:

Anyone who tries to maintain that wretched food makes no difference to an army, and cites Frederick the Great's accomplishments with ill-fed soldiers, is not taking a dispassionate view of the subject. Ability to endure privation is one of the soldier's finest qualities: without it an army cannot be filled with genuine military spirit. But privation must be temporary; it must be imposed by circumstances and not by an efficient system or a niggardly abstract calculation of the smallest ration that will keep a man alive (Clausewitz *ibid.*: 331).

There is little in *On War* to suggest that Clausewitz's concern for soldiers was a foretaste of the modern commander's preoccupation with the personal welfare, career fulfilment, individual development and aspirations of the individuals who make up an army. Nevertheless, Clausewitz had extensive military experience and knew that although the soldier was at the bottom of the social and military hierarchy, he was nevertheless at the centre of all military activity. On this basis, it seems reasonable to suggest that Clausewitz might not have taken issue with the tendency in today's staff colleges and military academies to further subdivide the three levels of war into five: grand strategic; military strategic; operational; tactical; and individual. Having adapted the Clausewitzian model to make the individual level of war explicit, it becomes relevant to remember that for Clausewitz the levels of war were not merely descriptive, but offered a dynamic account of an action- and outcome-oriented political–military process, with activity on each level driven by a sense of responsibility to a higher purpose:

[Strategy] is the use of an engagement for the purpose of the war. Though strategy in itself is concerned only with engagements, the theory of strategy must also consider its chief means of execution, the fighting forces. It must consider these in their own right and in their relation to other factors, for they shape the engagement and it is in turn on them that the effect of the engagement first makes itself felt. Strategic theory must therefore study the engagement in terms of its possible results and of the moral and psychological forces that largely determine its course (*ibid.*: 177).

Two observations should be made about Clausewitz's notion of purposive responsibility, by which military action on any level is defined, rationalised and justified. The first is that the Clausewitzian version of responsibility is emphatically not merely blind obedience in another guise. Clausewitz, we know, was always at pains to point out that he had no wish to write a manual for training or operations, and was deeply sceptical of formulaic, pseudo-scientific approaches to warfare:

No other human activity is so continuously or universally bound up with chance. [...] absolute, so-called mathematical, factors never find a firm basis in military calculations. From the very start there is an interplay of

possibilities, probabilities, good luck and bad that weaves its way throughout the length and breadth of the tapestry (ibid.: 85–86).

For his emphasis on chance and on the ‘genius’ of the commander, and generally for his antipathy to the idea of war as an exact science, Clausewitz has often been portrayed as the great rival of Antoine-Henri de Jomini, for whom the conduct of war was reducible to a set of rules and standard operating procedures. Beyond the Clausewitz/Jomini spat, however, some scholars have sensed in *On War* a departure from the Newtonian, linear epistemology of the Enlightenment, in all its self-confidence, towards more modern styles of explaining human behaviour, even to the point of prefiguring chaos theory.<sup>2</sup> Thus, Beyerchen has argued that ‘*On War* is suffused with the understanding that every war is inherently a non-linear phenomenon, the conduct of which changes in ways that cannot be analytically predicted’ (Beyerchen 1992/93: 61). Windsor came to a similar conclusion: ‘The point at which Clausewitz transcends the eighteenth century is in his recognition of the inapplicability of the scientific paradigm, and in his framing a mode of thought for the non-predictive’ (Windsor 1977: 193). But wherever he stands in relation either to the Enlightenment or to chaos theory, the simple point to make is that for Clausewitz warfare was a *human* rather than a *mechanical* activity.

The second observation to be made regarding Clausewitz’s idea of responsibility is that it was not necessarily value-free. Howard’s description of Clausewitz’s theory of war not only captures very clearly the dynamic relationship between the levels of war, it also introduces the possibility of values into that process:

Clausewitz’s theory was teleological. In warfare, every engagement was planned to serve a tactical purpose. These tactical purposes were determined by the requirements of strategy. The requirements of strategy were determined by the object of the war; and the object of the war was determined by State policy, the state being the highest embodiment of the values and the interests of the community. Thus the objectives of state policy ultimately dominated and determined military means the whole way down the hierarchy of strategy and tactics. War was not an independent entity with a value-system of its own (Howard 1983: 57).

Howard’s central argument here is that for Clausewitz the use of armed force should be ‘responsible’ in the sense of being purposive and professional. Yet embedded in this argument is an important challenge to those critics of Clausewitz for whom *On War* is both desiccated and amoral (at best). In Howard’s account, ‘values’—although not made explicit—are part of the politics of the state and could plainly contribute to the political decision to use armed force. Arguably then, through the overlapping levels of war, these values, however defined, could become the ethical standard against which individual actors could ultimately be held responsible (militarily, morally, or both) for their behaviour. In Howard’s view, although the Clausewitzian model does not require or encourage ethical reflection on the use of armed force, neither can it be said explicitly to discourage such reflection, nor to be

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<sup>2</sup> See Watts (1996: 106), Mann (1993), Beyerchen (1992/93).

incompatible with it. Barkawi, however, goes further than Howard to argue that the idea of strategic responsibility lends itself readily to a teleological ethic:

An ethic of responsibility underlies the strategic approach to international relations. It involves the rational selection of appropriate means to secure a state's political values, which, in questions of *strategy*, always contemplate the use of organised violence. The ethic of responsibility embraces the dictum that at least in politics the end can justify the means (Barkawi 1998: 163).

Barkawi distinguishes his 'ethic of responsibility' from 'an ethic of absolute conviction in which only actions ethical from the point of view of one's ultimate values are undertaken. The dictum here is "if I act rightly, good is attained."' (ibid.). Barkawi's juxtaposition of the Clausewitzian-style 'strategic approach' with consequentialist ethics would certainly invite comment from other scholars, however. Walzer, for example, would seem to be as uncomfortable with the idea that ends can justify means as he is with the 'ethic of absolute conviction', largely because either approach goes against the essential dualism of just war thinking. For Walzer, otherwise good intentions and acts can have bad consequences, and the soldier must be conscious of this possibility. Walzer insists that soldiers should be 'responsible for what they do' (Walzer ibid.: 40), for their decisions and errors, for their observation of the laws of war, and of course for any crimes 'against the conscience of mankind'.

*Proposition No. 5* begins by observing that the individual soldier with the capacity to act and to be responsible is intrinsic to Clausewitz's understanding of warfare, just as that same individual is intrinsic to any attempt at placing moral constraints on the conduct of warfare. The overlap between the military and the moral roles of the individual becomes apparent when it is seen that Clausewitz's theory of warfare is not structurally incompatible with values and ethics. And on the basis of a brief summary of the views of a number of scholars, it can be said that Clausewitz's theory of war actually encourages ethical debate, rather than excludes it.

## Conclusion

Clausewitz was not a moral philosopher. It seems unlikely, however, that Clausewitz could have been completely unaware of morality, and even less likely that he failed to perceive that there was a moral dimension to the military profession. There is some explicit evidence of Clausewitz's moral conscience at work in *On War*. But Clausewitz's moral credentials reside not so much in what he said, as in what he made it possible to say. Clausewitz establishes that the activity of warfare is bounded, largely by 'politics', but he does not exclude the possibility (perhaps the inevitability) that a principal ingredient of politics is morality. Whether by accident or design, *On War* then goes rather further into the moral realm. Not only are Clausewitz's theory of war and the just-war tradition functionally compatible, both also insist on the primacy of individual judgement. The argument of this essay therefore, albeit based largely on circumstantial evidence, is that two preoccupa-

tions of western military academies and staff colleges—Clausewitz on the one hand, and the just-war tradition on the other—can complement, rather than rival each other.

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## Biography

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