



Three Platonic Themes in Clausewitz: A Forgotten Legacy

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DOI: 10.22618/TP.PJCv.20215.2.114006

The PJCv Journal is published by Trivent Publishing



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Notwithstanding the lack of explicit references to Plato's works in Clausewitz's writings, this article argues that the Prussian General may have been influenced by the Greek philosopher. First, Clausewitz's concept of "absolute war" has an ideality close to that of a Platonic form, and some of its elements are already present in the Republic. Second, there are strong analogies between Clausewitz's trinitarian definition of war and the psychosocial features of Plato's city. Lastly, the article draws a comparison between Clausewitz's analysis of "martial genius" and Plato's concept of thumos.

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Introduction

The idea for this article came about when I found myself having to reread Clausewitz's *On war* for a class I was giving, and my surprise with what I found. I am relatively familiar with ancient philosophy and I began to find traces of its influence in the Prussian general's writing and, in particular, of Plato, a thinker who extensively studied the source of war, how it is prepared and fought, and how, in certain circumstances, it can be avoided. It may just have been an effect of the reading process, nevertheless, I would like to show that my reaction was not unfounded. It is true that there are few references to ancient and modern philosophy in Clausewitz's work, but the lack of quotations does not mean that his predecessors' ideas do not form an undercurrent that makes its way to the surface from time to time.

Alongside certain well-known influences, those of various 18th century generals and theorists, which he mentions mainly to distance himself from them, Clausewitz's theory of war shows a singular kinship over the centuries with some Platonic reflections. It begins by examining the concept of absolute war, only then considering the modifications needed to account for real warfare. We will see that there is here a striking parallel with the Platonic approach according to which, in any effort to gain knowledge, the Idea of the reality under consideration must come first, with the help of which it will then be possible to judge its sensitive manifestations, in this case, actual wars.

Secondly, the Trinitarian definition of war that concludes the first chapter of *On War*, connects the three dimensions of warlike behavior to the three parts of the soul, which, in turn, serve to describe the three sections of society. Here, it is easy to recognize the very

principles that govern the psycho-political construction of the Platonic City, whose starting point and guideline are also provided by the inescapable presence of war.

Finally, Clausewitz's fascinating analysis of the martial genius is, in fact, a vast reworking of the notion of ancient *thumos*. Of course, the discussion of warlike virtues has always constituted an important part in Western treatises on war, but in this case, borrowings and filiations seem quite clear: the vocabulary he uses to evoke temperaments hark back, in part, to Hippocrates, and the way he places courage and determination between appetite and understanding, as well as their respective definitions as servant of reason and guardian of thoughtful opinion, makes the Prussian general a not-so-secret heir to Plato.¹

I. Clausewitz's Idealism and Plato's Idealism

On opening Clausewitz's *On War*,² the reader is immediately struck by the originality of the author's method, evident from chapter 1 of Book I, in which the Prussian theorist attempts to lay out the elements that constitute the very concept of war, according to what he terms an absolute war, meaning one that is considered in isolation, free from any external influence that might affect its course. It is also absolute because war comes with an internal logic that commands its process. Obviously, Clausewitz is keen to point out that the actual experience of war rarely matches the concept. Nevertheless, the concept provides both a reference point and a structuring principle, that is hindered, to a greater or lesser extent, by the intervention of other factors.³

This approach is strangely similar to the one developed by Plato on the subject of Ideas or Forms. Plato also underlines the gap between the Ideas and sensible reality. For him, the Idea is not an abstraction based on the comparison of multiple experiences but a reality in and of itself (*auto kath' hauto*, or itself by itself, is quite a good equivalent to Clausewitz's "absolute").⁴ Plato also highlights the way the Idea dominates the sensible reality that it shapes.⁵ The knowledge that we acquire from these Ideas comes, according to Plato, from the way our intelligence autonomously proposes an intelligible hypothesis and then explores its nature and consequences.⁶ Similarly, in developing his concept of absolute war, Clausewitz does not feel the need to classify forms of war, neither does he think that it is possible, from the data observed, to lay down a set of rules about war to be followed by strategists and

¹ Our two authors witnessed "out of joint" conflicts: Peloponnesian wars for Plato, Napoleonic wars for Clausewitz, both of which times of heroism and its nightmare.

² The passages from Clausewitz are from *On War* by Carl Von Clausewitz, Edited and Translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976). The passages from Plato are from *Plato (Annotated): The Complete Works*, translated by Benjamin Jowett (University of Oxford, 1888).

³ On the concept as "standard," see Clausewitz, *On War*, VIII, 2, 580. The concept can be descriptive but also normative as "he who wants to learn from theory, becomes accustomed to keeping that point in view constantly, to measuring all his hope and fears by it, and to approximating it when *he can* or when *he must*." (ibid., 581; my emphasis). See also the remarks on "friction," which "distinguish real war from war on paper" (ibid., I, 7, 119). Clausewitz opposes "essence," which dictates the concept of absolute war and the "history," which presents scattered events, series of happy or unhappy occurrences that do not come together in a systematic or harmonious fashion (ibid., VIII 3 A, 582).

⁴ See Plato, *Parmenides* 128e6, 129d7, 130b8, 133a9; *Philebus* 53d7; *Phaedo* 78d6, 100b6; *Symposium*, 211b, *Timaeus* 51c1 and d4-5. In this contest, the very existence of Forms is independent of their sensible exemplifications, while the opposite is not true. The idea of separation involved is non-symmetrical. See G. Vlastos, "Separation," in *Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 256–264.

⁵ Plato, *Phaedo* 100d-e; *Parmenides* 132d3; *Sophist* 256b1, 259a7.

⁶ Plato, *Phaedo* 101d-e; *Republic*, VI, 511a-b.

tacticians.⁷ From the very beginning, he rules out an empirical approach: war's infinite variations prevent any form of enumeration or categorization. It cannot be reduced to a given taxonomy. War theorists cannot be likened to a naturalist who would try to draw from the many cases examined the species or *genera* of war according to their common traits.

On the other hand, there is such a thing as a concept of war, in as much as there is a certain logic of confrontation in any conflict, that either restrains or encourages, delays or accelerates it, but which, thanks to its intelligible structure, is always the same.⁸ This structure knows itself, as, according to Clausewitz, it follows an "invisible sequence of logical subtleties."⁹

Now that we have found what we might refer to as an epistemological convergence between our two writers, is it possible to take this further, beyond the level of method, and point out a more substantial kinship between them as to what war itself means, as to its own, inner logic? Clearly, if Clausewitz's thesis had been a mere rehash of the classics, his reputation would have suffered. His concept of absolute war is original, especially that of escalation to extremes, and there is no Platonic equivalent. Nevertheless, some of the components of this concept exist in Plato's writings, and while the Greek thinker does not explicitly attempt to elucidate the Form or the Idea of war, he does point out that to any well-constituted multiplicity can and must correspond an intelligible unity.¹⁰ In Book IV of the *Republic*, he underlines the *duality* of all wars, that structurally opposes two and only two parties. Indeed, belligerent antagonism leads to the bringing together of belligerents, who may initially be dispersed, into two opposing camps, friends or allies on one side, enemies on the other.¹¹ Clausewitz also defines war as a supercharged *duel*, which does not mean a private war or a cluster of single combats, but that it is inevitably based on a principle of polarity.¹² As such, war is an expression of discord and contrariness that sucks in the middlemen and causes the disadvantages of one pole to count as advantages for the other.¹³

Furthermore, Plato recognizes the hostility inherent to the political field, and in particular, hostility between cities: he sees the split between friend and enemy as structural, in as much as relationships based on this opposition tend to spread, and war, for Plato is, in fact, the actualization of this founding tension. However, to have an enemy is one thing, to hate him is quite another; according to Plato, while the philosophical leader is fully aware of the need for protection from external threats and the need for stable alliances, he is also fully aware of his enemy's humanity.¹⁴ As a result, he abides by Clausewitz's fundamental distinction between hostile intention and hostile feelings. For Clausewitz, the former provides the basis for the polemical relationship, and is enough for war to exist, the latter, however, is an

⁷ In book II, Clausewitz writes: "a positive doctrine <of war> is unattainable"; "talent and genius operate outside the rules, and theory conflicts with practice" (*On War*, II, 140).

⁸ The pure ideality of the concept of war was, according to R. Aron, outlined later on by Clausewitz: "Clausewitz only laid the foundation of his conceptual edifice, namely the unreality of absolute war, in the last years of his life, between 1827 and 1830." See Raymond Aron, *Clausewitz, Philosopher of War*, translated by Christine Booker and Norman Stone, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), 67.

⁹ Clausewitz, *On War*, I, 1, § 6.

¹⁰ Plato, *Republic*, V, 475a.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 422d. Compare to II, 375c.

¹² Clausewitz, *On War*, I, 1, §15–16.

¹³ On condition that the same form of war, defensive or offensive, is practiced by each. But the zero-sum game ceases to work if either one stands out by the choice of the form of war, due to the inequality between attack and defense, and the superiority of latter over the former. In this case (two forms of war at play), the polarity only applies to the decision (see *On War*, I, 1, § 16).

¹⁴ Plato, *Republic*, III, 376 b-d, see *Alcibiades* 119d. Regarding this topic, see my article: "La question barbare : Platon ou Aristote ?," *Revue de philosophie ancienne*, XXXII/1 (2014) : 87-136 ; 92-100.

addition that may increase the intensity of the animosity, influence the political aims of the war and change the level of effort in battle, but it is not, as such, strictly necessary.¹⁵

It remains that Clausewitz's theory of the way violence escalates to extremes as part of his analysis of absolute war is entirely original. This is what made him famous, and deservedly so. He suggests that this escalation is not empirical, but that it is the consequence of the initial structure of the polemical field. We could thus say that he subscribes to the constitutive ideality of war, to a greater extent than Plato. Given that combat is defined by hostile intentionality—to eliminate the enemy's resistance and force him to execute one's will—the escalation to extremes inevitably follows, at least in the internal logic of the bellicose confrontation. Indeed, each participant has the same end game, and given that each side knows this about the other and anticipates their behavior, there is a tendency to maximize commitment. There are no limits to the escalation of violence, precisely because of the will to end it quickly. When the threat is magnified, they hit hard, so they will not have to come back and the adversary does the same.

If one side uses force without compunction, undeterred by the bloodshed it involves, while the other side refrains, the first will gain the upper hand. That side will force the other to follow suit; each will drive its opponent toward extremes, and the only limiting factors are the counterpoises inherent in war.¹⁶

This is the first interaction, based on the connection between a hostile intention and an act of violence. The second interaction concerns the physical force of the armed troops and makes explicit the first as well as the escalation to extremes (§ 4). If State A uses X amount of force, and State B fights back with Y, a superior level of force, A will only be in a position to vanquish B by using Z, a level of force that is even higher, and so on. This is based on the following logic: “so long as I have not overthrown my opponent, I am bound to fear he may overthrow me.”¹⁷ We should also note Clausewitz's additional remark: “Thus I am not in control: he dictates to me as much as I dictate to him.”¹⁸ The principle of absolute war, that is to say, war reduced to its very essence, reconfigures individual approaches, which lose their autonomy by falling into a fatal tit-for-tat spiral.

The third interaction is a question of moral willpower (and not physical force) and underlines the perfect symmetry at work as each side attempts to undo the will of the other. The conflict between hostile wills obeys the same overbidding mechanism as the use of physical force (even though this is obviously much more difficult to quantify).

Alongside this escalation based on daring and anticipation, which presumes the opponent has the same end game, there is another type of escalation based on fear and reflection: assuming that one wants to limit the use of force, and therefore fixing a more modest objective than the complete destruction of the enemy (such as conquering a province, shoring up a border), this restraint must be tacitly shared with the enemy and depends on the likelihood of this hinted entente; objectively, there is no guarantee, and there is always the possibility that the enemy will decide to take advantage of the short respite in hostilities to strike back hard. Hence Clausewitz' warning: the prudent general who wishes to limit involvement and avoid “the first-born son of war,” must remain aware that he is nevertheless “moving on devious paths where the *god of war* may catch him unawares” and he must “always

¹⁵ Clausewitz, *On War*, I, 1, § 3, 76.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Book I, § 3, 75.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Book I, 1, § 4, 77.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Book I, 1, § 4, 77.

keep an eye on his opponent so that he does not, if the latter has taken up a sharp sword, approach him armed only with an ornamental rapier.”¹⁹

However, it is not written in stone that all real wars fall under the remit of absolute war, and in fact, Clausewitz appears to hesitate on the issue. At first, he was tempted to only use the term “war” for those that were close to absolute, however, due to the immense number of conflicts that did not fit in with his radical stance (all the post-Westphalian and pre-Napoleonic Cabinet wars), he eventually identified two types of war in his 1827 Note: those where the object was “to overthrow the enemy” and those that intended “merely to occupy some of his frontier-districts.”²⁰

Moreover, any prediction of what the enemy is doing, can do or wants, is always a matter of conjecture. The main configuration remains anticipation which bets on the adversary’s equivalent level of determination, due to either imitation or prudence. However, a relative moderation of the enemy is not totally excluded. If certain signs indicate the enemy’s wish for restraint, there are still two choices, which lead either to the upward spiral of the war or to its decrescendo. The first, the major option, sees the enemy taking up the challenge regardless and diving into the war effort with gusto, as he is convinced of our own determination, an eventuality that, in turn, pushes us to choose the utmost use of force. In which case, nothing can stop the infernal machine of war. The secondary option makes the wager that the adversary will still measure his effort, and this even encourages us to measure ours: “Anything omitted by one side becomes a real and objective reason for the other to reduce its efforts.”²¹ We are then invited to slow down the events, and to look at the aftermath of the battle, *i.e.*, all those that will have to be delivered later and for which we will need the reserves that we have not spent now. In this case, shared anticipation leads to a calming of the conflict and the limitation of combat, while also spreading the battles out over time.

In such intractably uncertain conditions, the twinned nature of the rivalry and the resulting specular imitation lead to an escalation to extremes, but also, with a slight change in the initial situation, to a flattening of the conflict. Together with a certain number of external factors (diminished strength, accidents in the field, troop fatigue and inertia), this, almost intrinsic modification of absolute war (given our lack of knowledge as to what the enemy is and wants) explains why wars frequently do not escalate.

Therefore, while Raymond Aron is right to point out the heuristic value of the concept of absolute war, that serves as a general reference to countless conflicts, more as a standard or ideal-type than the essence of the thing, René Girard is not wrong when he points out the way absolute war has a structural dynamic, not only when the information is, against all odds, transparent and complete, but even when it is partial, and that external realities—political ends, fragile alliances, logistical difficulties, slow and at times distressed troops—limit the explosion of violence.²²

Consequently, both the Platonic Idea and Clausewitzian concept come with an inherent ambiguity. Both are perfectly intelligible realities, in which innumerable empirical phenomena participate to varying degrees. In addition, it would only take a few “modifications” for the *Form* (of war in one, of the city in the other) to change, by which I mean for the empirical realities to attach to one model rather than another, even though one takes precedence over the other due to its power of attraction and logical priority (the secondary or tertiary configurations are deduced from the primary configuration by means of this or that

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, I, 2, 99. My emphasis.

²⁰ See also *ibid.*, I, 2, 69.

²¹ *On War*, I, 1, § 8, 80.

²² Raymond Aron, *Absolute War*, *Philosopher of War*, 69; René Girard, *Achever Clausewitz* (Paris: Flammarion, 2011 [2007]), 45.

permutation in its constituent features). The notion of absolute war in Clausewitz functions as an organizing principle behind the construction of polemical genres, on both a genealogical and an ontological level. In the same way, in Plato, the just city, whose principal traits—philosophical guardians, military auxiliaries, productive people—can be attributed to the outbreak of war, constitutes a rarely exemplified configuration but one that serves to highlight real situations, not only because of how they differ or stray from the model, but again, because of the fact that certain, often very slight changes in the primary configuration, can produce a range of eidetic variations that allows us to map out the future of the cities and to identify its main stages. While the just city relies on the submission of the warrior class to the philosopher class, and, as such, the precedence of political finality over military objectives, the first deformation—and reconfiguration—of the model leads to the political endgame becoming completely obscured by the military objective, the emancipation of the warlike *thumoi* and a shift toward absolute war, or at least to its conditions of possibility. The third, fourth and fifth configurations result from a power grab by the city's lowest class and the ultimate confiscation of that power by the tyrant. The inversion of the balance of power within the differentiated whole that makes up the city then leads to a series of model cases that provide a morphology of the history of cities.

We should also add that the relationship between empirical realities and concepts or models, often inscrutable in terms of external, natural things, is easier to understand in the field of human endeavors. For both of our writers, war, from the outset, is the result of teleologically structured actions that simultaneously aim at a political end and a military objective, providing both with the means to achieve this. The conflicting intentionality and intelligence of those involved spontaneously join with those of their allies and their enemies, according to predetermined patterns, while at the same time expressing the mental and social whole of which they are part, according to modalities that are also predetermined.

II. Trinitarian Definition of War and Psychosocial Division

This is why Clausewitz goes beyond the analysis of absolute war in terms of its perfect self-sustaining ideality. Book I of *On War*, along with Book VIII (given that we know that Book I was rewritten at the end, and as such is the only one that Clausewitz felt was definitive and therefore ready for publication), provide a final definition of war, which this time immerses war into society as a whole, and attempts to measure its ramifications in the various layers of both the social and the psychic organism. In this summary definition, however, it is not so much the unfinished or incomplete nature of any war or the discrepancy between the reality and the concept that Clausewitz is attempting to highlight, but instead the fact that war draws on the parts of the soul in different ways, just as it solicits social bodies in different ways. In what would appear to be the cornerstone of his thinking, Clausewitz's conceptual template for war is, again, very Platonic.

Let us see exactly what he says.

War is more than a true chameleon that slightly adapts its characteristics to a given case. As a total phenomenon, its dominant tendencies always make war a paradoxical trinity, composed of primordial violence, hatred and enmity, which are to be regarded as *a blind, natural force*²³; of the play of chance and probability within which *the creative spirit is free to roam*²⁴; and of its element of

²³ German “*blinder Naturtrieb*,” which can also translate into *blind natural drive*.

²⁴ German “*freien Seelentätigkeit*,” which can also translate into “*free activity of the soul*”.

subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject *to reason alone*.²⁵

The first of these three aspects mainly concerns the people; the second the commander and his army; the third the government. The passions that are to be kindled in war must already be inherent in the people; the scope which the play of courage and talent will enjoy in the realm of probability and chance depends on the particular character of the commander and the army; but the political aims are the business of the government alone.²⁶

The construction of this definition depends on connecting aspects of war with parts of the soul, according to a three-part division that corresponds exactly to the one in book IV of Plato's *Republic*.

a. First of all, hatred and enmity, which are parts of what Plato refers to as *epithumiai*, or passionate desires. According to Clausewitz, these are instincts that occur naturally in the soul, but that are blind as they lack discernment. They are autocatalytic in nature, they ignore objections and they only retain information that feeds their excitement. Nevertheless, the irrational forces of hatred and enmity act as the engines that drive the escalation of violence. They encourage the emergence of absolute war as outlined in its concept. Thus, what is paradoxically most intelligible in the phenomenon of war, because it is entirely determined by the pure logic of confrontation, is underpinned by passionate factors. An astonishing pact forms between the irrationality of the causes and the perfectly transparent logic of the process they condition.

b. The second part of the definition connects the circumstances of war with the aptitude to face it with courage and determination, virtues that both come from *thumos*, Plato's second part of the *psychè*. On this subject, Clausewitz speaks of the "creative spirit" being "free to roam." We must admit that this expression is rather borrowed from Kant, who uses it to designate the way the imagination plays, in particular in artistic pursuits.²⁷ However, in Kant, this wealth of imaginative activity is carried out under the remote guidance of a concept, which, for example, sets the requirements of pictorial representation so that it remains mimetic in the case of adherent beauty. The artist then explores all of the margins of this mimesis, he gives life to the sensible and makes it echo the spontaneity of understanding. By freely rebuilding the given to match the concept, sensibility can be inventive as well as receptive, and can illustrate people, animals, trees or landscapes in a new and varied way. Analogously, in the military domain, Clausewitz points out the flexibility of a mind that can

²⁵ German "*dem bloßen Verstande*", which can also translate into "*the sheer understanding*". "*Verstande*" is the Kantian term for the activity of conceptual synthesis and judgment of the human mind (the understanding) in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (see "The Transcendental Analytic").

²⁶ Clausewitz, *On War*, Book I, 1, § 28. My emphasis.

²⁷ Clausewitz twice refers to "this activity" as a "play (*spiel*) of courage and talent will enjoy in the realm of probability and chance," the §§ 20–23 bringing war and game together, through chance and probability, on both an objective and subjective level, to make the first, in the end, into a "serious game". For Kant (whom Clausewitz knew through his teacher, Kiesewetter, who was a popularizer of critical philosophy), the "judgment of taste" relies on "the state of mind in the free play (*freien Spiele*) of the Imagination and the Understanding" (see Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trad. John Henry Bernard (London: Macmillan, 1914), § 9, 65), whose "activity" is "indeterminate, yet harmonious" "through the stimulus of the given sensation" (§ 9, 69). He also points out in § 49, that "Spirit, in an aesthetical sense, is the name given to the animating principle of the mind" and is "that which puts the mental powers purposively into swing" and that "by aesthetical Idea I understand that representation of the Imagination which occasions much thought, without, however, any definite thought, *i.e.*, any concept, being capable of being adequate to it."

adapt to a variety of circumstances, and imagine ways to counter any setbacks, while adhering to a guiding principle outlined by the understanding. However, he also highlights the virtues of courage, firmness and perseverance, thanks to which wars can be waged effectively against an enemy that relies mainly on time and unpredictability to maintain its resistance. This, according to Plato, is evidence of *thumos*, a subject we will cover further on.

c. The third part of the synthetic definition places war at the heart of politics, making it an instrument of the State's personified intelligence. It is no longer a question of dealing with the unexpected and changing the course of action according to events in the theater of operations (which can include the nature of the terrain—the topology—, the enemy's strength, in number and quality and their location), but of coordinating war in line with political aims, and continually attempting to determine how close it is to reaching those ends. This depends on the understanding, which Plato, for his part, would call "logos," or, more specifically, *logistikon* (the rational power of calculation and combination, that in classical philosophy from Descartes to Kant is referred to as the understanding).

The tripartition of the soul is matched by a political tripartition. The first of the *psychè*'s components relates to the people, the second, to the general and his army and the third, to the government. The theory must take these three poles, or three tendencies, into account, while highlighting the fact that their respective importance may vary according to the war, but all three poles will always be present at some level: no war can be waged without passion, neither can it work without courage and imagination, nor without a certain idea of the political endgame involved. Furthermore, in the same way as these three elements are rooted in a psychological and cognitive structure, they occur to different degrees in different segments of the population: the people are passionate, the military is courageous, and the political leaders have their eyes on the prize. Here, therefore, we observe, line for line, the rigorous resumption of the Platonic parallel between two tripartite structures, the soul and the city.

Clausewitz uses this definition to outline the psychological and political refractions of war more than its inner logic (which was the case with the first definition). It is the soul that grasps war through its prism, and splits it into three sections: the belligerent instincts, the virtues required for conflict and the understanding of the end goal. Society also deconstructs war as follows; passion comes from the people, enduring imagination from the military, and a combination of strategy and politics from the politicians. The fact of naming all of the psychic and social components guarantee the completeness of the definition.

III. The Warlike Mood

The final point I would like to cover concerns more specifically the manifestation of the second part of the soul, *thumos*, in the context of a war. According to Plato, *thumos* contains the specific virtues of warriors and for Clausewitz it constitutes the crux of "martial genius."

First of all, I would like to expand on the notion of *thumos* in Plato, as this is not one of the best-known parts of the *Republic*, and I will then examine similar positions in Clausewitz.

Plato's *thumos* contains qualities that are essential to any fighter:

a. Thanks to *thumos*, human beings are capable of tenacity and perseverance under pressure, and impose their rights in combat situations (440d). This means that "he is to be deemed courageous whose spirit retains in pleasure and in pain the commands of reason about what he ought or ought not to fear" (442c1-3). When the term is introduced for the first time (in II, 375b), Socrates declares:

Have you never observed how invincible and unconquerable is spirit and how the presence of it makes the soul of any creature to be absolutely fearless and indomitable?

All of these writings highlight the steadfastness and resolution that form this part of the soul. We should add the fact that *thumos*, as the natural ally of reason, not only obeys reason but executes its decisions (442b). It should be seen as a sort of desire that is itself at the service of other desires that are preferable, but not always, rational. This explains the Platonic insistence on the resolute nature of *thumos*, the will to have always wanted, the desire to retain the ardor and energy that reason commands.

The need to act (and not acting is also a way of acting) requires making choices that get closer and closer to outlining a figure of the self.²⁸ What is at stake, then, is not only coherence, but also constancy: “here I stand,” one might say, or again, borrowing this time the more chronologically exact vocabulary of Homer paraphrasing the injunction of “patience” addressed to the heart: “Remain, my heart, enduring without respite in faithfulness.”²⁹

b. But *thumos* is not only located at the central point of articulation of the parts of the soul to each other, it is also at the junction of the psychic and the social, which makes the self both a moral and political issue. It thus provides war with its existential spring, at least within those traditions that link public recognition to accomplishments in the field of battle, in any case to the ability to overcome danger without ever losing sight of oneself and one’s own dignity.

Take the example Plato gives of Ulysses coming back to Ithaca, hitting his heart and exhorting himself to be patient, while inside, he is burning with anger and rage. As the master of the house disguised as a beggar, he is indignant when he sees the scandalous behavior of his servants with Penelope’s suitors. *Thumos*, Plato tells us, is the part of the soul that is in love with honors (VIII, 550b), it is entirely oriented toward *domination, victory* and a good reputation, as we are also told in book IX (581a). So, it is through this part that the soul is sensitive to justice, meaning that which is due to one’s rank (440cd).

Shame and honor, the two sides of *aidós*, a fundamental feeling in the Greek moral conscience, refer to how others see us and our social status, but they are highly interiorized and transfigure the social through the aesthetic. They feed as much one’s pride in one’s accomplishments that which is beautiful and therefore admirable, as one’s disgust or disdain at letting oneself stoop to a low or vulgar act. So it is with Leontios who insults and blames himself for giving into the temptation to look at the corpses swinging from the gallows. The example of Ulysses, who chides himself and hits his chest, adds a theatrical, and as such, social dimension to his conflict, as if his *psychè* was, in fact, tragically split into two characters fighting one another on stage in front of the audience. In book X, Socrates refers implicitly to the control *thumos* has over-emotional sensibility that manifests itself through tears: he mentions the fact that one tends to hold back tears and fight one’s sorrow when one’s peers are watching (604a). Here, our feeling of dignity, ally and executor of reason and *nomos*, functions as a social and moral watchdog over our animal bodies.

c. Finally, the education given to the soldiers in *Republic* is aimed at controlling their *thumos* by channeling their tendency toward conflict, rivalry and competition into something that is socially useful. Book II provides a surprising comparison between the philosopher guard (*phulakos*) and the dog, to show that an alliance can form between two, apparently irreconcilable characters, the passion for fighting the city’s enemies and the leniency toward one’s fellow citizens. A good watchdog has both of these qualities, and what is possible for

²⁸ As, in the end, one must decide on the modalities according to which one acts.

²⁹ Homer, *Odyssey*, XX, 23–24: τῷ δὲ μάλ’ ἐν πείσῃ καρδίῃ μένε τετληνυῖα νωλεμῶς (my translation).

an animal should also be possible for a man (376a). These two, however contrary, trends are honed, reinforced and harmonized by the double dressage of music and gymnastics. Above all, once they become adults, the best and the most skilled warriors will be not only praised and honored, but their romantic pursuits will also be facilitated, which, rather than mere sexual gratification, should be seen as an opportunity for those who have performed well on the battlefield to successfully seduce their sweethearts (468c): the admiration and love they receive will encourage them to be even more valiant (the same argument we find in Phaedrus' speech in Plato's *Symposium*). But all of these devices share the same theme: ensuring widespread virility as an unavoidable, unimpeachable faculty not to be undermined, at a time of supreme danger, by a surreptitious change in opinion or by a fatal doubt as to the legitimacy of the battle and the methods used. In book IV, courage is precisely defined as maintaining one's opinions in the face of danger: this is how the city shows itself to be prepared for war (IV, 429a), and what should constitute the selection criteria for the upper classes: the way to ensure the strength of future leaders' souls (III, 412-414b) is to test them in both the perils of war and the seduction of pleasure.

Going back to Clausewitz, we are immediately struck by the similarities with the virtues he attributes to martial genius. Admittedly, some of the qualities fall under the category of understanding rather than temperament, a question of the head rather than the heart: the quick glance, the presence of mind, and the sense of direction. However, moral dispositions play a decisive role and are described in terms not far removed from those used by Plato.

In the "fog of war," faced with the need to confront realities that are not those he had anticipated, the man-of-war must be both discerning and decisive. The latter complements the former. Indeed, while quick, precise decision-making presupposes that one instinctively masters the complexities of the theater of operations in terms of time and space (for example, seizing the exact moment for a cavalry charge and knowing exactly where to direct it), it touches on the truth without going through a long chain of reasoning. In doing so, the leader who cultivates this art exposes himself to criticism as he does not have the luxury of being able to justify his choices by well-planned calculations, for that he would need to be in his war room and not on the battle field. In addition, his decisions, if he is lucid, can, in retrospect, be questioned on some level, as there can be no perfect solution to the myriad of setbacks that occur in the field of action.

Consequently, he must be armed with courage, a virtue that is exercised both in the face of external danger but also in the face of the dangers of irresolution, and the inability to decide and stick to it³⁰. There are three ways in which this courage can be deployed.

1. Energy. Decisiveness and the continuation of combat demand extreme vigilance from the leader as the consequences of his choices go way beyond just himself, so he must keep the torment that comes with his responsibilities under control. He is aware to what extent any slowing down of the action can affect troop morale. It is up to him to boost failing willpower and to display calmness, self-confidence and determination when everything seems to be going wrong, as there is nothing worse for an army in difficulty than the impression that its leaders are hesitating or losing ground. He must therefore remain impervious to any dependency rising through the ranks, and inversely, become a source of top-down energy in order to revitalize the base. He must resist the crowd effect, and challenge the gravitational laws that can cause large groups to give in to inertia, defeatism, and even desertion, due to repeated hard blows. Strength of will must then increase with rank, to compensate for the increasing weight of the size of the troops under the leader's responsibility.

³⁰ Clausewitz, *On War*, I, 3, 102.

On this issue, Clausewitz brings back the notions of *honor* and *glory*.³¹ The leader can always share his patriotism, nationalism, fanaticism, thirst for vengeance or pure greed with his troops, but this just puts him on an equal footing with them. Only if he aspires to distinction and glory, will he attain the necessary energy it takes to direct an entire army, and he must spread it among his officers in order to benefit from the results of their emulation.

2. *Strength of soul.* This definition is astonishingly platonic in nature. For Clausewitz it is the ability to submit to reason, to obey, and maintain reason even in the face of the onslaught of passion and desire.³² This strength helps one to retain “self-control,” and is to be found in one’s temperament. Indeed, it is not just a question of intelligence, as many intelligent people are intemperate, even though Clausewitz also admits, a robust intelligence contributes to the strength of the soul. However, the latter also depends on a feeling that offsets and balances out instinct and passion. This comes from a certain self-esteem, the feeling of pride or dignity of someone who refuses to give in to impulses, but instead wants to control his behavior, to display a dedication to excellence, rather than falling apart and unraveling due to unforeseen circumstances.³³ In the midst of turmoil, his pride provides him with the strength to appear and therefore to be endowed with reason.

3. *Strength of character* means behaving consistently, thanks to one’s firmness of will (never deviating from what is right, making rational decisions unperturbed by adversity), and the solidity of understanding, which does not change one’s mind at every moment. Character, according to Clausewitz, is the determination with which a man sticks to his opinions, “the tenacity of will,” which is a literally the same as Plato’s term.³⁴ The pathetic experience of war is the new motif here: the emotions felt in the constant upheaval and brouhaha of war often provide bad advice; they take advantage of the shock the soul feels during conflict to cause changes of opinion. Understanding can be a versatile and clever sophist in order to justify giving in to violent and sudden passions. The soul can only resist these U-turns if it is sure that coherence and continuity of action in a field filled with unknowns will produce better results than the incessant direction changes of a dizzy, frightened mind.

Conclusion

We find, at the end of this brief journey, that Clausewitz would indeed appear to have recovered a Platonic inspiration. However, it is difficult to know whether this is a sort of unconscious influence or whether it is a freely, consciously acknowledged heritage.³⁵ It is clear

³¹ Ibid., I, 3, 105.

³² “We mean the ability to keep one’s head at times of exceptional stress and violent emotion.” Ibid., I, 3, 105; Compare with the “spirit,” that element that “fights,” by following “little part which rules,” and “retains in pleasure and in pain the commands of reason about what he ought or ought not to fear,” in Plato, *Republic*, IV, 442 b-c.

³³ “The counterweight we mean is simply the sense of human dignity, the noblest pride and deepest need of all: the urge to act rationally at all times”, *On War* I, 3, 106.

³⁴ Compare *On War* I, 3, 95, with *Republic* 422 b-c (“the part which fights and goes out to war [...] this sort of universal saving power of true opinion in conformity with law about real and false dangers I call and maintain to be courage”).

³⁵ Another ancient reminiscence also appears in Clausewitz’s text in the part that analyzes strength of the soul (I, 3, 92–95): mention is made of four character types, inspired by a very old classification of humors by Hippocrates (*On the Nature of Man*, IV-V; a text that is generally attributed to Hippocrates’ son-in-law, Polybus). Aristotle, or one of his disciples, link black bile to melancholy (*Problems* XXX, 1) and Galen (*In Hippocratis De natura hominis commentaria*, ed. Kühn, XV, 97) links blood, black bile and yellow bile to the humors sanguine, melancholic and choleric. The systematic classification and

that, with regard to his description of martial genius, Clausewitz could have found an analysis of warrior virtues that emphasized similar traits to the ones he chose to highlight in the work of many authors that came after Plato. Nevertheless, the definition of courage as remaining faithful to reason and unwavering opinions in the face of danger is sufficiently unique³⁶ to make the parallel between the two authors quite striking, beyond what their similar war experiences may have inspired. In addition, Clausewitz's reflections on absolute war and the concept of war itself could have found much inspiration in the post-Kantian atmosphere of German idealism, without having to recognize a specific debt to Plato, even if Plato was an essential reference for a number of writers of the time. The fact remains that Clausewitz needed to distance himself from empiricism in order to reflect on the pure concept of war, while also tackling the complexity of how it relates to history and to the real world, and both of these challenges are in direct line with fundamental Platonic thinking and the issues it raises. The most remarkable aspect, it seems to me, is the way he looks at war according to the parts of the soul it solicits, and the social classes it mobilizes. The division of the psychic unit and the political whole, as well as the correlation of their respective parts, powerfully echo the famous Platonic motifs of the *Republic*. The encounter between the two authors on all of these points is unsettling, an original example of somnambulism in the history of ideas.

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correspondence of the four humors (not forgetting phlegm), the four elements (wet, dry, hot, cold) and the four types of temperament (phlegmatic being the fourth), was established in Greek medical tradition by an anonymous treatise entitled *On the Constitution of the Universe and of Man*, and in the Latin tradition in texts by Pseudo-Soranus, Vindicianus, Isidore of Seville and Bede the Venerable. See the useful table set out by R. Klibansky, E. Panofsky and F. Stahl, in *Saturn and Melancholy* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1964), 97–102. See also Jacques Jouanna, who carefully established the connections between the Latin texts, showing how much they depend on a pseudo-hippocratic text: “La théorie des quatre humeurs et des quatre tempéraments dans la tradition latine (Vindicien, Pseudo-Soranos) et une source grecque retrouvée,” *Revue des Études Grecques* 118 (2005), 138–167.

³⁶ For example, Aristotle, in his analysis of courage, is clear on the fact that when one shows courage, it must be “surely on the noblest occasions: and those are the occasions which occur in war; for they involve the greatest and the noblest danger.” See Aristotle, *The Nichomachean Ethics of Aristotle*, translated by H.F. Peters (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1906), Book III, Chapter 6, 81. However, he mentions nothing about maintaining opinions and remaining faithful to them in the dangers of war (and of pleasure).

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