

A Phenomenology of War

A Theoretical Inquiry into the Existential-
Hermeneutic Structure of War, with Empirical
Reflections on the case of the British Soldier
in Afghanistan

By Mark Gilks

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Supervised by Dr Yvan Guichaoua and Dr Harmonie Toros

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Abstract

Drawing on the work of Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Hans-Georg Gadamer, I propose in this thesis a phenomenology of war. Theorising war as a particular way of *Being-in-the-world*, I am concerned with the phenomenological processes through which war is embodied, experienced, and enacted – and with how these processes constitute the possibility of war’s continuity in history. The overarching methodological argument is that war, as a structure of human affairs, must be phenomenologically grounded. War studies literature has recently conceived an ontology of war, but unless this ontology of war is firmly grounded in human *Being*—in experience and action as it persists in time—there will remain a tendency to hypostatise war as an inevitable and external fate. Within this framework, I make two main theoretical arguments: First, I make a hermeneutic claim that war is essentially historical and that it should be understood as a tradition which is “handed down” and “taken up” between generations; and second, I make an existentialist claim that the fundamental structure of war is *Being-against* (an Other). Integrating these arguments, I show that war is ontologically contingent on the human body which carries it forth as a structure of *Being* in time. Having developed this phenomenology of war in Part One, Part Two then seeks to exemplify this methodology through an examination of the case of the contemporary British soldier in Afghanistan. Across three chapters, I examine: (1) how the British soldier is constituted as a subjectivity in war; (2) how the Afghan war scene within which the soldier exists is constituted; and (3) how the soldier is constituted in relation to the prospect of death. The main contribution of this thesis, as such, is to introduce phenomenology into war studies as a method for understanding and critiquing war.

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1. Introduction: Towards a Phenomenology of War

1.1. Introduction

War—for a variety of interrelated reasons—has been largely disavowed within academic discourse. In the case of the ethical discourses which underpin much of critical theory, for example, war is understood as fundamentally antithetical to the possibility of human meaning and as an aberration from proper human conduct. Meanwhile, in the case of political theories—ranging from strategic studies to grand theories of social life—war is primarily understood as an instrument to achieve or avoid certain ends. Rarely have academic discourses been open to the possibility that the humans who participate in war do so because war is an end in itself; and there has been no systematic account of how war is constituted as a meaningful structure of human existence. Beginning with the normative conviction that the aforementioned rationalisations of war are detrimental to our ability to understand and avoid it, this thesis seeks to lay the groundwork for an immanent critique of war by theorising it from within. In particular, it seeks to disclose the logics of how war is generated and perpetuated as a meaningful structure of existence by examining the conditions of war's emergence and continuity in individual and collective life.

To do so, I propose a phenomenology of war. More specifically—and given the agenda stated above—I draw on Martin Heidegger's existentialist and hermeneutic critique of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, and on the legacy of this critique in the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Hans-Georg Gadamer. I build on aspects of each of these theorists to establish a unique phenomenology of war. From this existentialist-hermeneutic perspective, things exist in and through time, and time is understood as constitutive of existence. This thesis therefore examines war as a temporal-historical structure of existence – as a particular way of what Heidegger terms *Being-in-the-world*. It is concerned with the phenomenological processes through which war is embodied, experienced, and enacted; and with how these processes constitute the possibility for war's continuity in history. The first half of this thesis theorises these processes at a philosophical level, while the second half explores them empirically through the case of the contemporary British soldier in Afghanistan.

The overarching methodological argument of this thesis is that war, as an object of study, must be phenomenologically grounded. War studies literature has recently been advancing towards an ontology of war, but I show that unless the ontology of war is firmly grounded in human *Being*—in experience and action as it persists in time—there will invariably remain a tendency to objectify and reify war as an inevitable and external fate. There will be, in short, a disavowal of war and a related denial of human culpability for its perpetuation. This overarching methodological claim is grounded in

two interrelated phenomenological arguments. First, I make a hermeneutic claim that war is essentially historical and that it should be understood as a *tradition*: I argue that there is continuity between particular instances of war not because each war belongs to some timeless “essence” or “nature” of war (as analytic approaches imply) but because war has been “handed down” and “taken up” between successive generations as a meaningful way of *Being-in-the-world*. As a phenomenon, therefore, war is radically and inherently contingent on historical processes. Second, and as already indicated, I make an existentialist claim that war is a way of *Being-in-the-world*. In particular, I theorise enmity—what I refer to in phenomenological jargon as *Being-against*—as the fundamental meaning of war and as the generative and self-perpetuating logic of war’s existence as a structure. Integrating these arguments within the overarching phenomenological framework, it then becomes clear how war is fundamentally and necessarily embodied in human gesture—in experience and action—and how it is the human body which carries forth in time the tradition of war.

Since any study of war presupposes that war is a *thing* unto itself which can be studied, it is necessary to begin with a rough delineation of war as an object of study – even if, as is here the case, the aim is ultimately to undermine conventional assumptions implied by such requirements. As a preliminary working definition, therefore, I propose that war is a two-fold entity: First, war is—as Carl von Clausewitz (1832a) theorises in the opening sections of his *On War*—a violent and reciprocal clash of wills between two or more groups. This is the *manifestation* or “reality” of war.¹ Second, war is an *imaginary*, an idea, or a discourse which finds its source material in the “reality” described above but which weaves that material into the rest of social life. In the first sense, war exists only as isolated instances – as “outbreaks”; while in the second sense, war exists everywhere, in the human imagination and in the material fabric of society – it is a legacy which we must, consciously or otherwise, respond to in virtue of “civilised” existence.

The phenomenology I propose here, however, challenges what is conventionally entailed by the methodological imperative to delineate the object of study in the sense that “delineation” often implies

¹ By this definition, *reciprocity* and *violence* are fundamental features of “war”. The broader notion of “organised violence”, for example, is not necessarily “war” since it does not require *reciprocity* and includes things like genocide or football hooliganism (for an example of a study which centres around the notion of “organised violence”, see Malešević (2017)). Furthermore, by this definition, there is no war without acts of violent warfare. If, for example, we grant Yoram Dinstein’s distinction between *material* and *technical-legal* war—where material war is actual fighting between belligerents and technical war is constituted by formal-legal declarations—this definition implies an exclusive focus on the *material* dimension of war. As Dinstein puts it, ‘the decisive factor here is deeds rather than declarations’ (Dinstein 2011, 9; 15). By my theorisation below, the initial “deed” of war is the existential declaration of enmity.

distinctions and binaries which can be methodologically and metaphysically misleading.² Indeed, phenomenology teaches us that such delineations—although often necessary at the outset and often methodologically productive in their own ways—can often obscure an understanding of the given entity. In this case, for instance, the distinction between war as “reality” and war as an “imaginary” is problematic because “reality”, as Merleau-Ponty (1945) shows us, is already infused with the imagination, and the imagination is always anticipating some possible reality. Thus, there is not merely a “looping effect” between the reality of war and the way we imagine it, as some have shown (e.g., Bartelson 2018); more fundamentally, there is the human possibility—and indeed necessity—of synthesising “reality” and “imaginings” in the very fact of *Being-in-the-world*. It must first be recognised, therefore, that war—however it is methodologically “delineated” in academic discourse—is essentially a *phenomenon*. This thesis, then, might be understood as an exercise in “stepping back” from conventional assumptions about the ontology of war in order to re-examine how war is phenomenologically constituted. This argument will be clarified by outlining the structure of the thesis and its main contributions to existing war studies literature.

1.2. Structure of thesis

This thesis is divided into two main parts: Part One develops the main theoretical arguments; and Part Two applies this theory to the case of the contemporary British soldier in Afghanistan. Part One is divided into two chapters: Chapter 2 shows where I see the main contribution of this phenomenology of war in terms of the recent critical war studies literature; and Chapter 3 develops the main theoretical framework. Part Two, which includes its own methodological introduction, is then divided into three chapters, each of which explores a different dimension of the phenomenology of war. In this section of this Introduction, I summarise each of these chapters as well as outlining some methodological issues relating to the case selection.

² Even though I argue that war has an essence in the sense that it has essential features (such as reciprocity and violence) and can therefore be discerned as a structure of *being-in-the-World*, I do not presuppose that it is a categorical phenomenon which can be clearly “delineated” from antonymous entities, such as “peace”. Indeed, to some extent “war” and “peace” might be understood as relative concepts (Grob 1949). As I argue below, therefore, attempts to “delineate” war according to rigid criteria (such as the number of battle-related deaths) reflect axiological requirements more than the phenomenon itself (see Chapter 3, Section 3.2.B).

A. Part One

In Chapter 2, I demonstrate the need for a phenomenology of war within war studies. I focus on recent developments (over the last decade) within critical war studies – an interdisciplinary and heterogeneous field which has reinvigorated the study of war by exploring new theoretical and ethical issues. I highlight two important advances in this literature which, I argue, need further theoretical clarification. The first is an ontological claim that war is a generative force. Although an old idea, this thesis finds its most theoretically sophisticated annunciation in the recent work of Tarak Barkawi and Shane Brighton (e.g., 2011), and so I focus on these authors in making my arguments. The second major advance is a normative critique of “traditional” war studies literature which has overlooked the human body at the heart of war. Here, I focus on the work of Elaine Scarry (1985) and the subsequent work of Kevin McSorley (e.g., 2013) and Christine Sylvester (e.g., 2013a) as the seminal theorists advancing this approach. Both of these advances make significant contributions in their own regard, and my aim is not to undermine any of their critiques of the “traditional” war studies literature. My aim, rather, is to take these ideas further by theoretically integrating them and grounding them phenomenologically. To do so, I highlight philosophical and methodological weaknesses in each of these respective critiques as they stand. In the case of Barkawi and Brighton’s ontological claim that war is generative, I argue that “ontology” must be grounded in the human body lest war—as a generative logic—become reified and objectified as an external force. To some extent, the work of McSorley and Sylvester addresses this issue by placing the human body at the centre of the ontology of war; yet, as I show, these scholars have theorised the body only in a narrow sense by reducing war—following Scarry (1985)—to a “politics of injury”.³ Focusing only on the negative *effects* of war, such a view forecloses any understanding of how the body is itself the source of war’s generative logics. In both cases, therefore, war itself is strangely disavowed from the human body and its inherent capacity to generate meaning. As such, I conclude Chapter 2 by suggesting that these important theoretical advances need to be theoretically integrated.

If, as I proposed above, war is essentially a phenomenon, i.e., a structure which manifests in bodily perception, then our theoretical frameworks for understanding war must either account for this fact or, at very least, must not obscure it by disavowing war as some objective and exogenous entity, fact, or force. Chapter 3 therefore develops the main theoretical framework for understanding how the *embodiment of war* and *war itself* are ontologically indistinguishable. Here, I argue broadly that the generative “force” of war must be understood as originating in the human capacity to generate meaningful ontological structures. I do this in two steps. In the first section, I present a hermeneutic

³ The phrase “politics of injury” is Sylvester’s (2013a, 3), but her inspiration is Scarry (1985, 63–81). As I show in Chapter 2, this phrase is employed uncritically and without context in the more recent critical war studies literature.

argument that war should be ontologically understood as a tradition which is “handed down” and “taken up” by successive generations of human beings. I make this argument by contrasting it to what I characterise as *analytic historicism* – the view that there is such a thing as “war in general” and that war has a timeless “nature”. This view, I argue, misunderstands the logic of continuity which connects individual wars in time by characterising war as an exogenous force rather than something which is embodied in and through time. Even though it is of course possible to analytically categorise what appear to be timeless features of war, war itself has no “nature” – it is simply something humans *do*, and any “continuity” is grounded in the continuity of human *doing*. In the second section, I then present an existentialist-phenomenological framework to ground the ontology of war in the body. Drawing on Heidegger, I begin by showing that only as phenomenology is ontology possible – that all ontology is a projection of *Being* onto the world. I then theorise the fundamental structure of war as *Being-against* (i.e., enmity), and I show how *Being-against* is the source of war’s generative potential. As such, I argue that any structures of war which emerge in history are rooted in the existential logics of *Being-against*. Having theoretically established this fundamental structure of war, I then introduce the body as the site where *Being*, and therefore where *Being-against*, is manifest. War, as such, is understood as generated in and through the human body. In the final part of this section, I then show how the tradition of war as a structure of *Being-against* is embodied and carried forth in time through the aesthetic encounter with war in terms of its material and cultural heritage.

B. Part Two

Having lain the theoretical groundwork for a phenomenology of war in Part One, Part Two then explores these themes through the case of the contemporary British soldier in Afghanistan. Part Two comprises three empirical chapters as well as a substantial methodological introduction which discusses the particular methods used in each chapter. Before summarising each of these chapters, there are two important and related methodological issues to clarify, namely: the choice of case study; and my relation as author to this case.

i. Conceptual delineation: The contemporary British soldier in Afghanistan

The theory from Part One is explored and exemplified through the case of the *contemporary British soldier in Afghanistan*. Each of these terms is left intentionally vague due to the phenomenological imperative to undermine conventional assumptions about time, space, and individuality. By “*British soldier*”, I aim to capture the existential structure of a *Being* which embodies martial discourses as they exist in the historical context of the United Kingdom and which in this case is a *Being* in the context of

its *Being-against* the Taliban Other. The aim is therefore to examine how the British soldier, as an instance of *Being-against*, is constitutive of Self, World, and Other. I focus empirically on the combat soldier as an exemplary and extreme case of these logics.⁴ I therefore present the combat soldier as an archetypical case of a social actor who embodies war, and I suggest that understanding this case can facilitate an understanding of how war is embodied in more mundane and everyday contexts – such as reading a war novel or gazing at a war monument.

By *Afghanistan*, I do not mean the geographic area of Central Asia or the political entity that other political entities may or may not recognise as an autonomous “Afghanistan”. As used in this study, “Afghanistan” refers, rather, to the *existential space* that the British soldier understands and refers to as “Afghan”, or “Ganners”; to use military jargon, it is the British soldier’s “theatre of operations”; or, in phenomenological terms, his *World*. The British soldier is therefore not “in” Afghanistan in the sense that an object is in a box: The British soldier is not an object but a *Being*, and “Afghan” is not an objective space but a context, or milieu, for *his Being*. I am therefore examining how “Afghan” (or “Ganners”) and the British soldier are mutually constituted through the soldier’s *Being-there* (hereafter, I refer simply to *Afghan* when I am referring to this existential space of the British soldier).

Finally, the term *contemporary* is also intentionally vague. While I collect data from soldiers who were in Afghanistan between 2006 and 2014, one of the aims (especially in Chapter 5) is to explore how the “moment” of experience and action is always hermeneutically situated within a broader historical horizon. Thus, I argue that contemporary *Afghan* must be understood in relation to a British colonial legacy in Afghanistan, because those older aesthetic frames of war are carried forth and existentially projected to constitute the contemporary British soldier’s war scene.

ii. *The soldier as an extreme case*

But why the *British* soldier specifically, and why indeed the soldier generally, to exemplify a phenomenology of war? I focus on the soldier—as opposed to another social actor—because within contemporary society the soldier represents an archetypical case of a subject who embodies war’s generative logics. It is the soldier who carries forth the tradition of war in its most explicit form by embodying and enacting it. Thus, although the extreme case of the soldier entails unique logics which will not apply broadly, it also enables a clear exposure of themes which would elsewhere be present but not necessarily visible. “Soldier” might therefore be understood as a metaphor for the embodiment of war. Elsewhere, I have theorised how the battlefield tourist embodies war (Gilks 2021a), and further studies might examine how war is phenomenologically embodied in the most mundane and everyday

⁴ By “combat soldier”, I mean the “front line” soldier whose primary role is to engage the enemy in relatively close quarter battle using primarily small-arms weapons (i.e., assault rifles).

contexts. But focusing on the soldier in this thesis facilitates an examination of the embodiment of war in one of its starkest forms.

The *British* soldier, specifically, has been chosen for two reasons, one methodologically more “conventional” and the other phenomenological – both of which contribute to the validity of this study. First, the British soldier has had and continues to have a disproportionately large influence on war, both in the narrow sense as war itself as well as in terms of how war is imagined. As Basham writes, ‘As a particular ‘embodied community’ heavily involved in the global activities of war and war preparedness [...], considering how British soldiers perform and experience war and war preparedness may go some way towards helping us to think through how the geopolitics of war materialises’ (Basham 2013, 140). The British soldier therefore offers some sort of explanatory premium in terms of understanding the logics and forms of war more broadly. The second and main reason for choosing the British soldier, however, has to do with my existential proximity as author to the lifeworld I am attempting to articulate. I discuss this existential proximity in the following paragraphs but also in the methodological introduction to Part Two of this thesis.

iii. Authoring this work

Having formerly been a British soldier and having once fully embodied the British war in Afghanistan, an important aspect of this work is its (auto)ethnographic nature. As author, I have “access” to the existential reality of the British soldier in a way that I do not for the French, Turkish, or Chinese soldier – each of which could serve the same theoretical purpose of articulating the processes through which war is embodied. Because of this existential proximity, it is also necessary to critically consider my relationship to this text. My doctoral supervisors and I have frequently discussed whether this thesis should be autoethnographic – that is, whether I, as author, should explicitly position myself, as a subject, within the text. It is through deliberating this that I have reached certain conclusions about how to consider the significance of my existential proximity to the object of study and how best to exploit it methodologically. Although this thesis is not conventionally autoethnographic in the sense that I do not place myself as a subject in the text, I believe the phenomenological method adopted here in fact challenges the distinction between autoethnography, on the one hand, and, on the other, “traditional” academic voices where the author remains hidden. This conclusion was inspired by the literary critic Wayne Booth’s notion of the ‘implied author’. ‘Even the novel in which no narrator is dramatized’, Booth writes, ‘creates an implicit picture of an author who stands behind the scenes, whether as stage manager, as puppeteer, or as an indifferent God’ (Booth 1961, 151). Applying this logic to academic discourse, the difference between the two poles of autoethnography and positivist social science is not so much in the degree to which the author is existentially involved with what is articulated, but rather how explicit that involvement is – whether one dramatizes oneself or whether one pretends to be an

“indifferent God”. As the author of this text, I remain in the middle as a kind of “stage manager”; but this does not change the fact that I, as subject, am *implied* in each of the arguments. This can better be exemplified by considering my positionality in relation to each of the empirical chapters.

In Chapter 6, my existential proximity becomes most pronounced when I interview members of the Royal Marine Company with which I served in Afghanistan.⁵ I cite their testimonies of directly witnessing death as well as some of their broader reflections on the significance of death. Nothing they testified shocked or surprised me, and I might have made similar statements in as many words were the roles reversed. Yet *I*, as a subject, remain hidden from view. Why? The first reason is methodological. Since this work is highly theoretical, I worried that there would have been something contrived about my own testimony to myself-as-author. But in no sense, however, should this be understood as aspiring for “objectivity”. I have aimed, rather, for a clarity which is achieved through a separation of roles – one which required constructing a dense philosophical framework, and the other which required a more authentic and “naïve” testimony detached from formal theory. As author, however, my own subjectivity should be understood as *implied* in the entire thesis, in the synthesis that results from naïve testimony and philosophical reasoning – a synthesis which captures my own life trajectory from fervent soldier to critical scholar.

Chapter 6 is only the most explicit example where I, as a subject, am implicit in the text; but I am also implicit in a more ambiguous sense in Chapters 4 and 5. In Chapter 4, I interpret a novel/autobiography by a soldier from a different regiment of the military who documents an experience in Afghanistan where I was not at all subjectively present (and, indeed, it also remains ambiguous—I argue intentionally so—whether the author himself was present). Here, my “proximity” as a subject is in virtue of having once existed within similar hermeneutic forms of life as a British soldier in general; and as such, this “proximity” is purely *hermeneutic* (rather than *spatial-temporal*). In Chapter 5, meanwhile, I interpret official British war art; and if my academic voice becomes more detached and “objective”, it is only in an attempt to convince the reader of the validity of my aesthetic interpretation. The claim throughout this interpretation of official war art, however, is that the aesthetic forms that this medium exemplifies pertain to a common lifeworld of which the British soldier is the existential source. As the implied author, I therefore ultimately make some claim to first person authority – that there is some existential and hermeneutic “truth” in these aesthetic representations of the Afghan War Scene.⁶

⁵ To preserve the anonymity of the interviewees, I cannot be more precise than this.

⁶ In the Introduction to Part Two, I discuss how this “personal authority” relates to the selection of empirical methods/sources and to the overall validity of my arguments.

Overall, then, it might be said that this thesis is autoethnographic, but in a less conventional sense: Although I do not engage critically and directly with my own “lived experiences”, both the theoretical arguments and the empirical explorations might be understood as an attempt to make sense of experience such as *I* had. Thus, “I”—as an author and as a disjointed “subject” in time from which this author emerges—am implicated and *implied* in each of the propositions and arguments made below; and in no sense, therefore, should anything said be understood as “objective”. To not be forthright about this existential involvement with this thesis would be methodologically misleading.

iv. Summary of empirical chapters

The three chapters of Part Two each seek to understand the British soldier from a different perspective through a distinct set of sources. Through a phenomenological interpretation of former British soldier, Harry Parker’s (2016) debut “novel” *Anatomy of a Soldier*, Chapter 4 explores how the subjectivity of the British soldier is constituted. This text, which I argue should be understood as phenomenologically autobiographical, illustrates many of the themes of the theory I develop in Chapter 3. In particular, I argue that Parker’s unique object narrative literary method reveals how the soldier is constituted in relation to the objects and subjects he encounters in the course of *Becoming* the soldier. In Heideggerian language, I show that *Being* is always and necessarily *Being-amid-objects-and-subjects*; and that subjectivity is never an autonomous “I” but is always existentially entangled with the world in which it exists. Chapter 5 then examines the broader world within which the British soldier as a subject is constituted. In particular, I explore how impressionist paintings by official war artists can capture the aesthetic forms which hermeneutically constitute the Afghan war scene for the British soldier. Together, Chapters 4 and 5 thereby attempt to articulate the British soldier’s particular state of *Being-in-the-world*. Chapter 6 then tries to explain the broader significance of this lifeworld by considering how the British soldier regards the prospect of death. Drawing on Heidegger’s notion of *Being-towards-death*, I theorise the anxiety of death as something from which humans “flee”, and the “world”—as their “refuge”—is that into which they “flee”. It is only ironic, I conclude, that in the case of the soldier, the world into which he flees from death is a world in which death more readily occurs. Building on the theory in Part One, these empirical chapters therefore attempt to show how war is embodied and constituted in one of its most radical forms.

To summarise the overall structure of this thesis, Parts One and Two might be understood as offering a dialectic between theory and empirics. The empirical case is not meant to be an exhaustive analysis of the case itself, but is meant rather to illustrate how the phenomenological analysis of war might be conducted in practice. It offers examples of the kinds of empirical sources which might be considered and the methods which might be applied to them. The empirical section is also meant to

advance the phenomenological ideas developed in Part One through understanding them in their worldly manifestation.

1.3. Contributions of thesis

As discussed above, Chapter 2 sets out the focused contributions of this thesis in terms of the emerging literature in critical war studies. Beyond this, however, this thesis makes two broader contributions to the study of war generally. The first is to establish a precedent for a phenomenology of war which can be applied, developed, and critiqued. It is important to highlight the curious absence of existing such studies in this regard. There have been numerous phenomenologies of violence (e.g., Staudigl 2007b; Dodd 2009), and there has been no shortage of treatise on war itself from all disciplinary perspectives. Yet, besides preliminary propositions (Brighton 2011; Narozhna 2021), a phenomenology of war has not been conducted in any systematic or sustained fashion. This thesis, as such, attempts a first substantial step in this direction.

The contribution of phenomenology to war studies can be stated most generally in terms of the divide between analytic philosophy and phenomenology more broadly, and the extent to which these philosophical methods and traditions have been adopted by the social sciences and humanities and subsequently applied to the study of war. From a phenomenological perspective, it becomes clear how the analytic presuppositions which dominate the existing war studies literature prevent this literature from understanding war in a way that I claim is insightful. So what, then, is analytic philosophy, in relation to phenomenology? *Analysis*—the method of analytic philosophy and the method which underpins most of social science in general—implies a piecemeal approach to understanding where the *object of analysis* is broken down conceptually into what are supposed to be its constitutive parts. In Bertrand Russell’s words, “‘Divide and conquer’ is the maxim of success’ (Russell 1918, 113). This method has been incredibly influential in the social sciences and humanities – and is implied in the notion of “delineation” as discussed above. As I show in Chapter 3, analytic presuppositions not only underpin much of the literature in war studies, but even permeate the critical literature.⁷

The problem with the method of *analysis*, as Gilbert Ryle notes, is that it invariably ‘does violence to the vital fact that philosophical problems inevitably interlock in all sorts of ways’ (Ryle 1957, 185). I suggested above, for example, that the analytic distinction between the “reality” of war and the broader societal imaginings of war can obscure the ways in which these “elements of analysis” are mutually constituted – how the way war is imagined infuses the way it is waged, and vice versa.

⁷ For a general overview of the analytic method, see Beaney (2013).

Other distinctions which I challenge below include that between subject and object, self and world, and self and other. In Chapter 4, for example, I show that the soldier, as a subject, cannot be distinguished from the objects in and through which he becomes a soldier; and in Chapter 5, I challenge the distinction between the soldier and world (i.e., war scene) by showing how they are mutually constituted. This is not to say that analytic distinctions are invalid, but rather to explore how such categories can be limiting and to show that analytic categories do not reflect the things in themselves but are *methodological tools* which we apply to the object of study. The inherent problem with analysis, as I show in Chapter 3, is that the analytic category tends to have a powerful effect on our ability to see the entity outside of that categorisation. In particular, I argue that “war” becomes historicised and objectified as it is disavowed from the humans who embody it. Overall, I try to show that challenging dominant and deep-rooted analytic presuppositions can insightfully inform the study of war.⁸

The second major contribution—as indicated in the opening to this chapter—is to provide a theoretical foundation for an immanent critique of war. One of the ontological arguments that I make in the first half of Chapter 3 is that war cannot be understood objectively because we can only ever have an historical perspective upon war – thereby challenging the analytic notion that war has a “nature”.⁹ This historical perspective, moreover, is not itself outside of war (when war is understood in the broader sense of the societal imaginaries of war). This means that war can only be understood from within – hence the notion of immanent critique. In virtue of “civilised” life, we are all—myself and reader alike—*within* war; to varying degrees and in different ways, we are all “retainers” of war experience (Toros et al. 2018). One of the overarching aims of this thesis, therefore, is to show how war can be understood from within, on its own terms, and through its own logics; and how its meaningful structures can be disclosed and their essential contingency made theoretically clear. A phenomenology of war, I propose, is the basis for undermining historical structures of war, and may therefore offer a foundation for a more effective critique and for social reform.

A final note on style: As mentioned above, the phenomenological method adopted here can be understood as a response to the predominance—and what I argue are the limitations—of the analytic method. Seeing things through the lens of phenomenology therefore often requires understanding basic

⁸ It is important to note that the analytic and phenomenological methods are not mutually exclusive and that there is considerable overlap. This overlap is clear, for instance, in the historical development of the traditions themselves (Smith 2013). As I show below, however, the implications of these methods becomes pronounced in the way they are applied to empirical issues.

⁹ “Perspective” should here be understood in a phenomenological sense, i.e., as being *in relation to, alongside*. The notion of “objective perspective” is therefore entirely oxymoronic; and critique is always immanent, alongside – i.e., from within the world one is critiquing.

concepts in a new way. The self, for instance, is understood as fundamentally embedded in and contingent on the world (milieu) in which the self understands itself, while the world thereby becomes a projection of the self. To emphasise when a given term is being used in a phenomenological sense, the term will be capitalised – thus, Self and World. Further, when terms are hyphenated, it is to emphasise—following phenomenological convention—the essential unity of the terms (e.g., *Being-in-the-world*). Lastly, I use inverted commas to cite others; and where I use double quotation marks, it is to emphasise that I am challenging the way the concept is conventionally being used.

Part One: A Phenomenology of War

2. Theoretical prelude: The ontology of war and the body in critical war studies

So, what can be said of the ontology of war, that fundamental character which manifests itself in each instance of war and is true of war in general?
(Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 134)

So much more can be said about bodies as contested entities and frameworks for thinking about war and experience
(Sylvester 2012b, 501)

2.1. Introduction

Although, as I noted in the Introduction, there have been no systematic phenomenologies of war, many of the theoretical claims I develop in the following chapters have parallels within the existing war studies literature – albeit rooted in different philosophical and theoretical perspectives. In particular, scholars working within the emerging field of critical war studies¹⁰ have developed similar lines of inquiry to those I develop throughout this thesis, focusing on issues such as the ontology of war, war's generative effects, experience, and embodiment. This chapter situates this phenomenology of war

¹⁰ I use the term *critical war studies* in the broadest sense to include any scholars who study war and who are critical of war itself and of the way it has traditionally been studied across the disciplines. As such, I use the term “critical war studies” as an umbrella term to encompass Critical War Studies (referring specifically to the works of Tarak Barkawi (2011) and Shane Brighton (2011, 2013; Barkawi and Brighton 2011)), Critical Military Studies (e.g., Basham, Belkin, and Gifkins 2015), as well as the work of those working in critical geography of war (e.g., Gregory 2011) and critical sociologies of war (e.g., McSorley 2014).

within this emerging field of literature. Since my overarching theoretical aim in this thesis is to account for the processes through which war is constitutively embodied, I focus on two separate strands in this literature, one which theorises the ontological constitution of war, and the other which theorises the body in war. My aims in this chapter are two-fold: First, I seek to outline and build on the theoretical insights of this literature which are relevant to a phenomenology of war; and second, I outline the theoretical limitations of this literature as they appear from the perspective of phenomenology so that I can clearly demonstrate the potential for a phenomenological contribution in Chapter 3.

This chapter is divided into two main sections, each of which considers a different strand of the literature mentioned above. In section (2.2), I consider the idea that war is ontogenetic (that it is an emergent structure). I begin by defining some of the main terminology that will be used going forward, namely the notions of “ontology” and “ontogenesis”. I then focus on what is arguably the most sophisticated attempt to date to theorise war ontologically, namely, a 2011 article by Barkawi and Brighton. Drawing on Clausewitz and Foucault, Barkawi and Brighton provide an ontology of war which integrates war and society by theorising the generative effects of fighting on broader social and political structures. After outlining the merits of their work, I argue that the Foucauldian framework they employ overlooks the constitutive role of the human body in generating what they refer to as “War/Truth”. Any theory of epistemic power, I argue, must account for how that power is embodied and carried forth; otherwise, I suggest, human agency is negated and war risks becoming objectified as an unhuman and exogenous force.

In section (2.3), I then consider to what extent the corporeal, experiential, and (nascent) phenomenological “turns” in critical war studies provide a theoretical basis for understanding the embodiment of war. Rather than conducting a comprehensive review of this literature, I focus on the most sophisticated and systematic attempts to theorise the body in war. In particular, I consider the work of Elaine Scarry, Kevin McSorley, and Christine Sylvester, as well as one recent attempt by Tanya Narozhna to build on these other theorists and conduct a phenomenology of war. Although these theorists facilitate important terminological developments, as well as providing the normative imperative to place the human body at the centre of the study of war, I argue that this literature cannot ground the ontology of war in the human body. This is because these aforementioned theorists are committed to a reductive normative ontology which understand war as inherently destructive of meaning. Thus, for these critical scholars, the object of study is less the embodiment of war and more the embodiment of war’s tragic effects, namely injury. As such, the embodiment of the meaningfulness of war itself is not theorised.

Overall, I show that the body and war are theorised only independently and therefore remain curiously disjointed within critical war studies. In the following chapter, where I develop the theoretical

basis for a phenomenology of war, my aim is to integrate and advance these two strands in the literature by theorising how war is constitutively embodied.

2.2. The ontogenesis of war

A. Introduction

The study of war presupposes a conceptual delineation of “war”; and this conceptual delineation, in turn, presupposes a notion of what war *is* as a spatial and temporal entity beyond that conceptualisation. Thus, the ontology of war, as the study of what war *is*, is foundational for the general study of war; and whether explicit or—as is most often the case—implicit, the study of war necessarily presupposes an ontology of war. Furthermore, since war is constituted in and through time, then the ontology of war in turn presupposes an account of how war, as an entity, emerges and evolves as a social structure (i.e., how it *comes into existence*).¹¹ This *processual* ontology in turn leads to questions about how war affects other, pre-existing social and material structures. To be sure, the study of war can—and generally does—proceed without delving into such methodological technicalities; yet since the phenomenology of war I develop in the next chapters will hinge on a critique of existing presuppositions in this regard, it is important at the outset to clarify these foundational issues. In this section, I therefore consider such issues through the recent literature in (critical) war studies.

This section is divided into two subsections. First, I delineate the notions of “ontology” and “ontogenesis” and I begin to make the case for their methodological usefulness for war studies. I then discuss Barkawi and Brighton’s Foucauldian ontology of war and outline what I argue—coming from a phenomenological perspective—is an essential flaw in their approach. A critique of this ontology of war will provide a basis going forward to ground the ontology of war in human *Being*.

B. Preliminary conceptualisations: Ontology and ontogenesis

This thesis will rely on an etymologically precise use of the terms “ontology” and “ontogenesis”, and it is crucial that these terms are clearly defined at the outset and the ambiguity which surrounds them abated. Each of these terms is ambiguous for a different reason. The problem with the conventional understanding of “ontology” in social science is that the term has been colloquialised and its precise meaning obscured; and since my argument in Chapter 3 will depend on a precise (etymological)

¹¹ As far as I am aware, the only existing attempt to theorise the ontology of war as explicitly *processual* is by Bousquet, Grove, and Shah (2020), which I discuss more below.

meaning of this term, it is crucial that I restore this term to its etymological meaning. “Ontogenesis”, meanwhile, is not a term which is commonly used in social scientific discourse, and it will therefore require a preliminary analysis and definition.

i. The ontology of war

The term “ontology” is used ambiguously in the social sciences, and it is important here to distinguish between its colloquial and technical usages, and then to replace its colloquial usage with a new term so that “ontology” can be reserved for its etymologically precise usage.¹² Colloquially, when social scientists use the term “ontology”, they are generally referring to (and, as I will show, presupposing) *the existence of something*. In this colloquial sense, the term “the ontology of war”, for instance, simply means *the reality of war*, or *that which war is*. The reason why, in this case, the term “the ontology of war” is used instead of just “war” is to express a commitment to a form of philosophical realism: “War” is not just a concept that we discursively wield, but is a social structure unto itself to which the concept “war” refers; thus, by saying “the ontology of war” instead of just “war”, the social theorist is making explicit their underlying philosophical commitments.¹³ By invoking “the ontology of war”, therefore, the theorist is setting up the methodological necessity to delineate that which war is.

In a more technical (and etymologically correct) sense, “ontology” means *the study of existence*. The term “the ontology of war” in this technical sense then means *the study of war’s existence* (i.e., not merely *the reality of war*, as is implied colloquially, but rather *the existential problematisation of that reality*). The crucial difference between the colloquial and technical senses is that the colloquial usage of “ontology” takes existence for granted, while the technical sense problematises that existence as *the* object of study. In the existing war studies literature, this distinction is often hard to detect; but I will argue that precision around such key terms is essential if we are to effectively problematise the existence of war and avoid taking it for granted.¹⁴ Given this necessity for clarity, I will henceforth only use the

¹² Etymologically, “onto” implies *being, that which exists*; while “logy”, in this combination, refers to the disciplined study of that existence. Ontology is therefore *the study of that which exists, i.e., of being*.

¹³ Social realism is the idea that social structures exist in their own right, and cannot be reduced—whether for methodological or metaphysical reasons—to their constituent parts.

¹⁴ The nuance between the colloquial and technical usage is often hard to detect, and many studies seem to oscillate between the two. Let me give some examples from the literature: When, for instance, Barkawi and Brighton say that ‘the final element of *war’s ontology* is its power to remake what is unmade’ (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 140, my emphasis), they are using “ontology” in the colloquial sense (i.e., to imply “war’s reality”, or “the structure of war”); but elsewhere in the same article they use it in a strict, etymological sense. Nordin and Öberg seem to recognise the distinction I am making when they refer to the ‘relationship between the *ontic reality of warfare* and the *ontology of war*’ (Nordin and Öberg 2015, 409, my emphasis); but elsewhere they use it in a

term “ontology” in its technical methodological sense. Otherwise, when I am referring to the *ontic structure of war* itself, I will simply use War (encapsulated), or sometimes the fully implied phenomenological term *being-of-war*. This distinction will help me problematise—metaphysically, methodologically and normatively—the existence of war.

ii. *The ontogenesis of war*

Unless one thinks that war has a timeless and eternal “nature” (an idea I critique in the following chapter), the ontology of war implies the study of the ontogenesis of war. The focus, as such, is less on what war *is* than on how it *becomes*; or rather, as Bousquet, Grove, and Shah (2020) have argued, the *becoming* of war is that which it *is* (Cf., Bousquet 2019).¹⁵ In the next chapter, I explore the inherently temporal nature of war from a hermeneutic-phenomenological perspective and argue that any methodology which abstracts war from its temporal processes will misunderstand its “nature”. Here, I briefly consider what has recently been said in the critical war studies literature about the notion of ontogenesis.

Because my use of the term ontogenesis was inspired by Jens Bartelson’s term “ontogenetic war”, I begin with a critical discussion of his use of this term so that I can distinguish my usage from his. In his *War in International Thought* (2018), Bartelson conducts a genealogy of the idea of war in modern history. Drawing on Ian Hacking’s notion of “looping effects”, he is particularly concerned with how the idea of war effects the occurrence of war. He takes aim specifically at an idea of war which characterises it a productive or generative force – an understanding or characterisation of war which he—‘for want of a better term’—dubs ‘ontogenetic war’ (Bartelson 2018, 16). Thus, “ontogenetic war”, for Bartelson, is not a description of war itself, but rather a description of *an idea about war*. On Bartelson’s genealogical account, this idea of war has been dominant since antiquity with only a brief

colloquial sense when, for example, they suggest that ‘the various ways of grappling with war’s ontology [i.e., reality/structure] are active parts of how this reality remains intact’ (Nordin and Öberg 2015, 407). In her study of new technologies in war, Holmqvist also uses “ontology” in a colloquial sense; she speaks, for instance, of ‘studying war as a phenomenon with its own ontological condition [...]’, and of ‘an ontology of rational individualism’ (Holmqvist 2013, 538; 544). This may seem pedantic, but as my whole argument hinges on problematising the existence of war then it is essential to be precise with such terms. For an example which uses “ontology” in an etymologically precise way, see Bousquet, Grove, and Shah (2020). In this article, the authors use “ontology” only to refer to *the study of war’s existence* (they call, for instance, ‘for a strange, paradoxical and provisional ontology that is consonant with the confounding mutability of war’ (Bousquet, Grove, and Shah 2020, 100))

¹⁵ The etymology of *ontogenesis* is: “onto”, which implies *being, that which exists*; while “genesis”, implies the process by which something *comes into being, or birth*.

interlude in the twentieth century when war was understood as primarily destructive – something he links to the invention of nuclear weapons, which ‘convinced Western elites that war could no longer serve any constructive purposes whatsoever’ (Bartelson 2018, 184). Bartelson’s ultimate concerns, however, are not merely genealogical in the sense of explaining historical processes; rather, he seems to be motivated by a normative concern of how war has been legitimised. For Bartelson, “ontogenetic war” is a dangerous idea which has been used to legitimise war by people who see the world as in need of the order that war eventually establishes; war, understood as ontogenetic, is thereby instrumentalised to bring about social and political change. Furthermore, besides this instrumentalist logic, Bartelson also sees the notion of “ontogenetic war” as fatalist because it characterises war ‘as an inescapable part of the human condition and a natural fact of political life’ (Bartelson 2018, 24). Bartelson’s normative plea, then, is that we should take back control of these particular “looping effects” that legitimise war, that we should bring ‘war back within the scope of human volition and responsibility’, and that ‘we should refrain from attributing ontogenetic capacities to anything but ourselves’ (Bartelson 2018, 24).

Although Bartelson’s genealogy of war offers many insights on its own terms (which I will not discuss here), and although I agree with his claim that only humans have ontogenetic capacities (a claim I develop in the next chapter from a phenomenological perspective), I want to take issue with what I suggest is a particular methodological shortcoming of his theory. In particular, Bartelson fails to make a clear distinction between war itself and the conceptualisation or theorisation of war, and subsequently between ontology and intellectual history. This is evidenced when he characterises the recent work of Barkawi and Brighton as complicit in the resurgence of the idea of “ontogenetic war”. It is in the work of Barkawi and Brighton, Bartelson suggests, that the notion of “ontogenetic war” (unfortunately, Bartelson thinks) finds ‘what appears to be the most succinct statement to date’ (Bartelson 2018, 21–22). Bartelson argues ‘that this view of war [as ontogenetic] should not be taken at face value and used as a starting point for a critical study of war but that it should be carefully contextualised and historicized with the aim of loosening its grip on our political imagination’ (Bartelson 2018, 22). To be sure, Bartelson is right that any theory of war should be subjected to the kind of genealogical scrutiny that he suggests. But his characterisation of Barkawi and Brighton as merely peddling an instrumentalised notion of generative war exposes Bartelson as overstating his claims. The mere fact that an idea has been exploited for political purposes does not alter the veracity of the claim itself, neither does it necessarily alter its validity. Bartelson is right to point out that the social world is subject to “looping effects” – that our discourses about that world (unlike discourses about the natural world) have an effect on that world. But this fact—which needs to be incorporated into social scientific methodologies about war by encouraging self-reflexivity—is no reason to renounce inquiry into war’s ontogenetic nature. On the contrary, it presents an imperative to double down on that enquiry and to incorporate (in this case) intellectual history within the ontology of war. If *war* is ontogenetic, then this ontogenesis needs

to be studied; and if the *study of war* is also ontogenetic—as Bartelson argues—then this ontogenesis also needs to be studied. All this to say that social ontology should be politically, socially, and historically self-reflexive.

Barkawi and Brighton’s own self-defence on this issue is instructive. As they show, Bartelson fails to distinguish between the *logic of war* itself (which Barkawi and Brighton theorise as generative) and an *idea of war* which exploits this fact politically in order to legitimise war. Bartelson, they claim, overinflates the significance of intellectual history: Beginning with the important observation that ideas have been mobilised to legitimise war, he concludes by suggesting that the ontology of war should be subsumed within intellectual history. But war, as Barkawi and Brighton show, far exceeds knowledge about war (let alone intellectual knowledge): ‘Histories and sociologies of war [...] exceed the ‘looking effects’ of modern conceptions of political and international order and their naming and regulating of war’ (Barkawi and Brighton 2019, 100–101). War, in short, exceeds thought about war (Barkawi and Brighton 2019, 101), and our theories of war should therefore attempt to capture that which war is beyond any instrumentalization of an idea about war. Ultimately, intellectual history should be a part of the ontology of war because the *being-of-war* encompasses ideas about war.

Based on this engagement with Bartelson’s critique of “ontogenetic war”, I want to reclaim the notion of ontogenesis as a valid methodological concept for understanding war (Cf., Bousquet 2019). I do this substantially in what follows, beginning in the following section with a consideration of Barkawi and Brighton’s understanding of war as a “generative force”, and then in the following chapter where I develop a phenomenological theory of war’s constitutive and historical logics. In the rest of this section, I focus on clarifying “ontogenesis” conceptually and begin to explore its philosophical and methodological implications.

To say that war is ontogenetic is to draw theoretical focus to the *coming-into-being* of the *being-of-war*. More specifically, *ontogenesis* highlights the temporality of the existential state of war: War—whatever it is—happens in and through time and occupies and structures space. Furthermore, war does not *come-into-being* in a vacuum but necessarily interrupts, modifies, and displaces pre-existing spatial-temporal structures. This interruption happens along various spatial-temporal scales: Most acutely, for example, war displaces peace by generating violence; and most broadly, war has been a driving force of history, displacing an infinity of counterfactuals with the contingency of our particular historical predicament. Like any social entity, therefore, war has a structuring effect on the space and time it occupies; but war, more than most other social processes, is notable in the energies that it mobilises and in the socio-material transformations that it precipitates.

In the existing literature, the ontogenesis of war is typically described by observing that war is a generative of productive force. As Bartelson (2018) shows, this is an ancient idea which stretches back

at least as far as Heraclitus (Cf. Brighton 2013). In contemporary social theory, this idea is captured most famously in Charles Tilly's dictum that 'war made the state, and the state made war' (Tilly 1975, 42)¹⁶, and has more recently been theorised by Barkawi and Brighton from a critical Foucauldian perspective (as I discuss in the following subsection). Saying that war is "generative" or "productive", however, is to make certain theoretical and philosophical commitments beyond the claim that war is ontogenetic. In particular, saying that war is "generative" risks presupposing the existence of war; it is to imply that war is a *thing*, and that this thing "produces" other things in a causal fashion. Thus, when Tilly said that 'war made the state, and the state made war', he is implying causal effects between war and state, even if the direction of causation is not linear but circular. To the extent that this terminology is committed to causal theory, it risks overlooking the mutually constitutive relationship between that which generates and that which is generated. Furthermore, this terminology presupposes the existential autonomy of the entities between which there is a causal relation, i.e., war and state. As such, it theoretically forecloses the idea that war is an essential part of the existence of the state – that war and the state are existentially entangled. I am not claiming that Tilly or any others who use this terminology make these theoretical claims (both Tilly as well as Barkawi and Brighton are certainly sensitive to this issue); rather, I seek to outline the potential—subtle but consequential—philosophical implications of a certain terminology (i.e., "generative" and "productive").

A promising approach in the more recent literature which avoids the limitations of the aforementioned theories is to consider war more broadly as an *ecology of relations* which incorporates the natural and social world as they persist in time (Grove 2014, 2019; Bousquet 2019; Bousquet, Grove, and Shah 2020). For Grove, "ecology" is less a metaphor than a means for promoting 'relational thinking [which] accretes from empirical scrutiny' (Grove 2014, 367). In a later article, Bousquet, Grove, and Shah (2020) propose to study this ecology of war through an empiricist method which they term martial empiricism. Choosing a 'fidelity to the world [...] over fidelity to a method [...] martial empiricism permits war to define itself' (Bousquet et al. 2020 103-104). From this perspective, ontogenesis 'demands an exploration of the persistence of war [...] as an ecology in which the tenacity of war is underpinned by a web of relations binding a medley of bodies, objects, ideas, practices and affects together' (Bousquet, Grove, and Shah 2020, 113, note 4). Thus, they call 'for a strange, paradoxical and provisional ontology that is consonant with the confounding mutability of war' and which does not presuppose its "nature" or essence (Bousquet, Grove, and Shah 2020, 100). The

¹⁶ This idea has been popular among historical sociologists more broadly; see, for example, Tilly (1990, 1985), Mann (1993), Giddens (1986), and Hirst (2001). As mentioned above, these historical sociologists have focused almost exclusively at the macro-historical level of analysis. For an examination of how this "generative force" works at the micro-level, see, for example, Kalyvas *et al.* (2008). For an overview, see Brighton (2019).

phenomenology I develop in this thesis might be understood as an alternative approach to martial empiricism as a means of understanding the ecology of war. The “ecology of war”, as such, might be understood as the phenomenon (i.e., object of study), while phenomenology is the method.

In sum: Although, as Bartelson has argued, the *idea* that war is ontogenetic may be dangerously employed to legitimise war, this does not alter the ontological fact of whether or not war *is* ontogenetic; and if it is ontogenetic (as I will argue and as many others have argued), then its ontogenetic logics must be the object of scientific examination lest they go unexamined and be surrendered to those who instrumentalise them. I have therefore sought to defend the notion of ontogenesis within war studies. My main claim which I have sought to establish in a preliminary fashion has been that the ontology of war is necessarily the *study of the ontogenesis of war* – since the being of war is always in motion. From the phenomenological perspective developed in the next chapter, however, I will speak less of “ontogenesis” and instead use terms such as *constitutive*, *emergence*, and *disclosure*. All of these terms refer to the *processes* through which (social) entities come into existence; but in line with the phenomenological theorists I draw on, I will rely on these latter terms to make my arguments. The notion of ontogenesis, however, will remain implicit in my arguments throughout.

C. War as epistemic power: “War/Truth”

So far in this section, I have outlined the notion of ontology and ontogenesis that will feed into this phenomenology of war. In particular I have shown that the *ontology of war* is the study of the ontogenesis of war – of what war *is*, how it *comes-into-being* (is generated, constituted), and what effect its existence has on wider socio-political structures (what it generates, constitutes). Although there are no existing systematic studies which examine the ontogenesis of war in this regard, there have been notable recent attempts to conduct an ontology of war. The most sophisticated of these, I believe, is articulated in a 2011 article by Barkawi and Brighton where the authors propose a Foucauldian ontology of war. In this subsection, I explore the merits and limitations of their approach as a way of highlighting the potential—and indeed necessity—for a phenomenological contribution to the ontology of war. I begin by reconstructing their theoretical framework, and I then argue that that their Foucauldian framework problematically unhinges the ontology of war from the human body. This unhinging has the effect of negating human agency and objectifying war – both of which I suggest are methodologically problematic.

i. Theorising “War/Truth”

Beginning with the observation that there is a divide in the existing war studies literature such that scholars tend to either study war *or* the effects of war on society, Barkawi and Brighton seek to outline

an ontology of war which can capture the constitutive circuits that exist between war, politics, and society. In particular, they are interested in understanding how seemingly pacific social orders have their genesis in the contingencies created by war – and thus how war is ontogenetic of socio-political orders. For Barkawi and Brighton, these entanglements of war, politics, and society should be understood at the level of epistemic power, and for this reason they draw on a Foucauldian framework. They ‘argue that war’s fundamental properties are in part revealed by its disordering and reordering of knowledge’ (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 127). Their ontology of war is therefore first and foremost a critical epistemology of war, where socio-historical structures are constituted in the power of knowledge – in epistemic power. To understand these (epistemic) logics of war’s ontogenesis, they draw on Clausewitz and Foucault to develop an intricate framework which helps to articulate how war, politics, and society are intertwined and mutually constituted.

Their first theoretical step is to ground their ontology of war in fighting. Since fighting ‘is that which thematically unifies war in general and in particular’, any ontology of war must account for its significance (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 135).¹⁷ The significance of fighting, however, is not taken for granted but rather ontologically problematised. In particular, they seek to understand the relationship between fighting and the social and political orders which are established in the wake of fighting. As I understand their argument, however, fighting itself is not understood as ontogenetic; rather, as a moment of ‘pure contingency, fighting exceeds kinetic exchange, *marking a point* of genesis and a vanishing point for social and political orders and the ontologies on which they rest’ (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 139, my emphasis). Thus, fighting does not itself *generate*, but creates a set of conditions in which generation subsequently occurs. In particular, fighting generates a ‘field of contingency’ which ‘disrupts settled narratives and drives their remaking’ (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 127). Beyond the clash of arms, therefore, fighting must be examined ontologically in the broader context of destruction and the ontogenesis which it facilitates.¹⁸

The reason why fighting is ontologically significant, for Barkawi and Brighton, is because of the contingency it essentialises. Drawing on Clausewitz’s notion of uncertainty, Barkawi and Brighton understand war as an event that “undoes” previous certainties and generates new ones in its wake

¹⁷ In a sole-authored piece, Brighton defines fighting as the ‘relations of organised, purposive armed violence between socio-political groups and the forms of mobilisation and organisation needed to support them’ (Brighton 2019, 134).

¹⁸ In the next chapter, I will challenge the validity of “fighting” for understanding the ontogenesis of war; I will argue that it is not fighting that precipitates contingency, but rather the enmity of which fighting is only the most climactic manifestation. There, I will argue that fighting should be understood as inherently destructive.

(Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 139).¹⁹ Thus, war, as a ‘field of contingency’, is essentially a field of uncertainty. The pre-war state is one of certitude; but fighting, by its chaotic nature, generates uncertainty; and certainty is then re-imposed in the aftermath of war as humans seek to find “Truth” retrospectively amid ‘the contingencies of war’ (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 140). The logic of ontogenesis that fighting precipitates is therefore one of undoing and the subsequent creation of a space for remaking. This notion of uncertainty therefore ‘illuminates the relationship between war’s interior [i.e., fighting], political-strategic logics, and its wider excess, the “casting into motion” of social and political orders’ (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 138). But what are the logics of this remaking, of this ‘disordering and reordering of knowledge’?

To encapsulate these aforementioned logics, and to capture the dimensions of power which are invariably involved in the production of new certainties, Barkawi and Brighton draw on Foucault’s knowledge/power schema to introduce the notion of “War/Truth”. As a methodological concept, ‘War/Truth enables the tracing of the intimacy between the battlefield and the wider social, political, and cultural field war helps constitute’ (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 127). As I understand, however, “War/Truth” is more than a methodological tool; it is rather an *ontic structure* within which both war and “peace” occur. In their words: ‘the nature of War/Truth is creative, less a product of the generative powers of war, it is *a primary site for their realization*’ (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 140, my emphasis). War/Truth therefore represents the epistemic infrastructure of society and history; it is the fabric into which knowledge of war and war itself is woven. Each of us exists within this epistemic structure; indeed, all theories of war—theirs and this one included—are a part of “War/Truth” (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 142).

Before critiquing this theory, I want to highlight several of its merits from which I take my departure for a phenomenology of war. The first major contribution is the proposition that war needs to be examined ontologically. Whether one agrees with the implications of their proposed Foucauldian framework, their problematisation of the existing state of the literature is important. As they show, although there is an extensive interdisciplinary literature on war, these literatures tend to ‘presuppose some core object of inquiry’ (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 128; Barkawi 2011). Although I will not reiterate this argument here, I believe that Barkawi and Brighton have made a strong case for the importance of studying war ontologically. Second, they have simultaneously problematised any pretence to universal theory by placing emphasis on ‘war’s recalcitrance as an object of knowledge’ (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 133). Thus, although we should seek to say ‘something fundamental about what war is’ (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 134), this should not lead us to believe that war can be pinned

¹⁹ Clausewitz understood war as a radically uncertain activity which depends on luck and genius – which is why he thought there can be no definitive theory of war.

down in a universal ontology. Since both the activity and the broader discourses of war are embedded in constitutive circuits, then the *being-of-war* is essentially a fluid entity; and any theory of war, moreover, is necessarily within these circuits. Third, and more substantively, they have established a theoretical and an epistemic-ontological link between war and society: *Theoretically*, they have shown that the study of war itself and the study of the societal effects of war must be interlinked – an imperative which is based on the epistemic-ontological circuits which run between these two domains. Thus, they are able to ‘move from “war *and* society” to “war *in* society” [and to] focus anew on the multiple traces of war’s generative powers and their function in the production of social and political orders’ (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 139). Each of these contributions feed directly into the phenomenological ontology of war I develop in the next Chapter.

ii. A critique: The missing body

Notwithstanding these merits, however, I want to now explore some of the limitations of Barkawi and Brighton’s Foucauldian ontology of war to the end of outlining the potential for a phenomenological contribution. In particular, I focus on the implications that their notion of “War/Truth” has for an understanding of the human *Being*, and how the notion of “War/Truth” in turn risks objectifying war.

My point of departure for this critique of Barkawi and Brighton’s Foucauldian framework is to consider the neglected significance of the human body. Indeed, the body is largely absent from Barkawi and Brighton’s ontology of war; and when it does come into view, it is a docile and helpless entity which invariably succumbs to the ontogenetic forces of an epistemic power which is beyond its control. Drawing on Levinas, for example, the body is spoken of as being “cast into motion” by war (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 136); and war, as such, is primarily something that *happens to* bodies, rather than something that bodies do. Although it is recognised that humans make ‘existential investments’ in “War/Truths”, what is important for Barkawi and Brighton is not these investments themselves but only how these investments ‘remain vulnerable to the contingencies of war’ (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 140). War as “War/Truth”, therefore, is an epistemic superstructure which encompasses and defines both war and peace. The result is that within Barkawi and Brighton’s Foucauldian framework the ontology of war is detached from the human body. This has two detrimental and interrelated methodological implications which I briefly explore: Namely, on the one hand, human agency is disavowed, and on the other, war itself becomes objectified and even hypostatized.

Barkawi and Brighton’s disavowal of human agency hinges on their application of Clausewitz’s notion of “uncertainty” – an essential unpredictability which characterises war. Applying this notion more broadly to the ontology of war and to war’s epistemic-ontogenetic logics, Barkawi and Brighton understand war in the following terms: ‘A fundamental, essential, property of war is thus the actual and potential undoing of all that stands as essential in human orders. The ontological structure and the

ontological status of war as an event centre on the *undoing of certitudes*' (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 139, my emphasis). I contend, however, that this is an overly reductive ontology of war in that it brushes over the lived reality of human participation in war. To make this point, it is necessary to distinguish between *strategic certainty* (i.e., the ability to predict outcomes in war and the kind of certainty Clausewitz was interested in), on the one hand, and *existential certainty*, on the other. As I will argue in Chapter 3, ontologically more fundamental than the ability to determine outcomes in war (i.e., *strategic certitude*) is the striving for *existential certitude* which often defines experience in war and which gives rise to strategic incertitude; indeed, from a phenomenological-existential perspective, it is the *desire for certainty* which is the condition for the possibility of uncertainty (and the *desire for certainty* is therefore the exogenous variable in Barkawi and Brighton's analysis). As such, I contend that Barkawi and Brighton place the emphasis the wrong way round when they say that 'existential investments [...] remain vulnerable to the contingencies of war' (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 140). It is of course true that the existential investments in war made by soldiers, politicians, citizens, etc., are vulnerable to the contingencies of the unfolding of that war – which is primarily because they are always investments in a world which is not one's world alone, but is a world constituted in a dialectic with the enemy, among other exogenous forces. But at a more fundamental level, it must be ontologically emphasised that war itself is *necessarily* (existentially) contingent on the existential investments that humans make in war. If there were no existential investments in "War/Truth", there could be no "War/Truth", and hence no war. "War/Truth", therefore, is not a "force" unto itself, but is the ontogenetic *manifestation* of human investments in war – however *strategically* hopeless those investments may be.²⁰

Furthermore, this theoretical relegation of the human body, coupled with the disavowal of agency, tends towards the objectification of war. If the epistemic power of "War/Truth" is not ultimately grounded in human *Being*—in existential commitments and agency, no matter how short-sighted—then it will slip away theoretically into the metaphysics of social theory. Humans then become cogs within the machine of war – a secular version of the pantheistic Greek narrative where we humans become mere pawns as the gods of war entertain themselves at our tragic expense. I contend, therefore, that the

²⁰ It is not a necessary condition of agency that it achieves its ends. If, for example, I choose to become a soldier because I want a glorious war, the fact that I become disillusioned with war does not undermine my act of agency to become a soldier in the first place – it just exposes my short-sightedness and the contingency of events. Moreover, my subsequent attempt to re-narrate my story and endow it retrospectively with meaning does not undermine the original act of agency either, but is rather a new act of agency in itself. In the next chapter, I will begin to theorise how all existential investments in war are necessarily acts of agency, and how such acts of agency must be incorporated into the ontology of war.

ontology of war should not construe war as a celestial “force” but as a structure of *human* activity; and “power”, as such, must be understood as grounded in the cumulative effect of embodied expression.

In conclusion: I do not want to suggest that we resort to a kind of methodological individualism where we renounce methodological concepts which theorise extra-individual structures. Indeed, I believe Barkawi and Brighton’s “War/Truth” schema is a crucial part of the ontology and critique of war. My aim, rather, is to show that any such theory must make the *human* body theoretically explicit – because when it is left *implicit* it tends to be disavowed of its essential properties. Since the body is *the* condition for the possibility of knowledge, then any theory of epistemic power must ultimately be grounded in an ontology of the body. Taking Barkawi and Brighton’s ontology forward, then, it is necessary to explore how “War/Truth” is embraced, enacted, asserted, contested, and taken for granted by humans at the “micro” level of experience and action.

D. Conclusion

In this section, I have explored the possibility for an ontology of war. I began with a conceptual analysis of the terms “ontology” and “ontogenesis” which will become crucial for the phenomenology I develop in the next chapter. I then considered what I believe is the most sophisticated ontology of war to date, namely Barkawi and Brighton’s Clausewitzian-Foucauldian theorisation of war’s epistemic structures. Their study was particularly useful to highlight the related methodological risks of disavowing human of agency on the one hand, and of objectifying war on the other. To avoid this, the human body must be placed at the heart of any ontology of war. In Chapter 3, I do this theoretically by grounding the ontogenesis of war in the human body; while in the empirical chapters in Part Two, I explore these logics through the case of the British soldier in Afghanistan, considering how the soldier embodies and simultaneously constitutes “War/Truth”. Before this, however, the final section of this chapter considers the “corporeal turn” in the recent critical war studies literature to explore to what extent the body has already been theorised ontologically as constituting the heart of war.

2.3. The embodiment of war

A. Introduction

So far, I have argued that the body must be at the heart of any ontology of war. If the body is not theorised in this way, then the ontogenetic role of human agency is overlooked and war itself becomes objectified. Within critical war studies more broadly, however, the body has indeed been theorised. In what might be referred to as the corporeal and experiential “turns”, the body has been at the centre of

methodological attention; and there is even a nascent “phenomenological turn”. In this section, I examine this emerging literature within the context of seeking to integrate the body into the ontology of war. Since a comprehensive analysis of this literature is beyond my present scope, I focus on what I argue are the seminal authors in each of these “turns”. In particular, I consider the work of Elaine Scarry (1985), Kevin McSorley (2013, 2014, 2012), and Christine Sylvester (2013a, 2012a, 2011b, Cf., 2015) as representing the corporal and experiential turns; and I then consider a recent article by Tanya Narozhna (2021) which represents a first attempt to conduct a phenomenology of war.

Although these critical “turns” have developed rich theoretical and methodological resources which have advanced the study of war in important new directions, I argue that the potential contributions of this emerging literature to the understanding of war have been fundamentally undermined by an overarching ontological presupposition which construes war as an inherently meaning-destroying phenomenon. This presupposition then determines the way the relationship between war and the body is understood and studied. In particular, war is characterised as an exogenous force which destroys human bodies (and war is thereby defined—following the work of Elaine Scarry—as a “politics of injury”). I suggest that the result is that the “corporeal turn” in war studies ironically drives an ontological wedge between war and the human body – and that this literature is not primarily interested in the embodiment of war but the embodiment of war’s tragic effects. As such, my critique of this critical literature will demonstrate the need for a new philosophical framework for understanding the ontology of war, one which provides a foundation for integrating the “force” of war into the human body. I develop this critique through three subsections. In the first subsection, I reconstruct the main insights of the corporeal, experiential, and phenomenological “turns”. In the second subsection, I develop the main critique of this literature. Here, as outlined above, I suggest that a moral disillusionment with war has resulted in a predominant focus on the pity of war. In the final subsection, I then seek to open up a broader ontology of war.

Before beginning this discussion, it is necessary to offer a normative caveat. My accusation against critical scholars for understanding war through the lens of disillusioned pacifism is not a moral but a *methodological* imputation. If we start with the premise that war is inherently destructive of meaning, then the processes through which war is constitutive of meaning are a priori ruled out. Rather than deny that they exist, I contend that it is the responsibility of critical theorists to undermine established meanings. Thus, the arguments which follow should in no sense be understood as a moral or aesthetic defence of war. These arguments, rather, aim to facilitate what I contend will be a more effective critique of war – one which understands the inherent meaningfulness of war and which can thereby undermine those meanings.

B. Corporeal, experiential, and phenomenological “turns”

The corporeal and experiential turns in war studies are motivated largely in response to the oversights of the “traditional” war studies literature. These oversights are documented most powerfully by Elaine Scarry in her seminal work, *The Body in Pain* (1985). Here, she outlines in great detail the striking fact that academic (and popular) discourses on war have so often tended to obscure the most blatant reality of war – that of destroying human bodies. It is worth citing Scarry at length here. ‘The main purpose and outcome of war’, she writes,

is injuring. Though this fact is too self-evident and massive ever to be directly contested, it can be indirectly contested by many means and disappear from view along many separate paths. It may disappear from view simply by being omitted: one can read many pages of a historical or strategic account of a particular military campaign, or listen to many successive installments in a newscast narrative of events in a contemporary war, without encountering the acknowledgement that the purpose of event described is to alter (to burn, to blast, to shell, to cut) human tissue, as well as to alter the surface, shape, and deep entirety of the objects that human beings recognize as extensions of themselves (Scarry 1985, 63–64)²¹

It is through this kind of humanistic and impassioned critique that Scarry’s seminal work inaugurated a critical agenda to place the human body back at the centre of the study of war. As I explore below, the basic ontological proposition about war that she provides—that the “purpose” of war is injury—has become a central pillar of much recent work.

This line of reasoning has been significantly advanced in the work of Kevin McSorley (2013, 2014, 2012). As a sociologist, McSorley begins with a broader observation about the significance of the body across the sociological literature generally. He argues that within sociology, the body has traditionally been pacified:

While it has been regarded as producing and consuming in countless ways, [the body] has rarely been thought of as fundamentally shaped or moved by war, preparation for war, or the legacies of war. The intertwining of war and the body has thus remained an object of limited and sporadic analytic attention for the social sciences, leading to a relative paucity of theoretical resources on how to formulate and think about such linkages (McSorley 2014, 112)

McSorley is interested in understanding how bodies embody war in the broadest sense. In his edited volume entitled *War and the Body: Militarisation, Practice and Experience* (2013), for example,

²¹ Scarry goes on to describe several other ways in which the purpose of injuring may disappear from view (Scarry 1985, 80).

McSorley notes that embodied practices of war include not only the ‘specific modes of embodying force and practices of ‘warfighting’’, but also ‘the bodily preparations for, and the corporeal aftermaths of, war – both within militaries and beyond’ (McSorley 2013, 2). Like Barkawi and Brighton, therefore, McSorley is interested in the *effects* of fighting beyond the spatial and temporal scope of fighting itself; but McSorley is explicitly interested in how those effects are taken up by the body. This theoretical scope opens up new research agendas. As he has explored in subsequent work (McSorley 2020), for example, the insight that war is essentially embodied leads to questions about the sensations and experiences which ground war ontologically in the body.

Another strand in the critical research has been to shift the focus from the primacy of the body to the primacy of experience in war. The consideration of embodied experience in war has been advanced primarily by feminist critical war studies scholars (Alison 2009; Enloe 2010; Cohn 2012; Parashar 2013; Sjoberg 2013). As a methodological starting point for studying war, “experience” has been theorised most extensively in the work of Christine Sylvester (2011a, 2012b, 2013b, 2013b, 2015). Starting with similar motivations as Scarry and McSorley, but this time working primarily in the discipline of International Relations (IR), Sylvester is critical of “traditional” war studies for abstracting away from the human body and lived experiences of war. In this broader literature on war, Sylvester provocatively observes, the people who actually experience war ‘lurk as shadows and ghosts’ (Sylvester 2013b, 11).

Sylvester sets out with broad ambitions, calling at one point for a ‘fully-fledged exploration in IR of war as experience’ (Sylvester 2012a, 485). She is also un-reductive in her general understanding of war: War experiences, she observes, ‘come in prosaic, profound, sickening, excruciating, and exhilarating ways’ (Sylvester 2011c, 127). Furthermore, by focusing on embodied experiences, she seeks to recover the agency of those experiencing war – an agency which is otherwise lost in strategic abstractions. Relevant for this inquiry, Sylvester also recognises the lack of theoretical resources for understanding experiences in war, and she points to the potential for a phenomenological intervention as a way of avoiding a reductive understanding of war which focuses on injury (Sylvester 2012a, 497).

This call for a phenomenology of war has been taken up recently in an article by Tanya Narozhna (2021), and it is at this point of the emerging critical war studies literature which comes closest to what I propose in the following chapter. Mapping ‘an ontology of war anchored directly in embodied experiences’, Narozhna seeks to go further than McSorley by theoretically integrating ontology into corporeality (Narozhna 2021, 3). She rightly points out that this has been lacking in war studies, and she extensively documents the limitations of Sylvester’s arguments. In particular, she takes aim at poststructuralist approaches which dominate theorising about the body. Drawing on the work of Eric Ringmar (2019), she argues that conceiving the ‘body as the amalgam of social norms’, poststructuralist research tends to reduce the body to ‘the ontological side effects of discursive practices’ (Narozhna

2021, 7). As she insightfully writes: ‘With the focus on the workings of discourse in and through war, a poststructuralist perspective cannot delve deep enough into the power of war to affect basic structures of consciousness and agential capacities of the embodied subjects’ (Narozhna 2021, 9). Her proposal, of course, is for a phenomenological conceptualisation of the body in war which can theoretically reinstate the agent in the machine that is war; and her general summary of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the body is succinct and informative in this regard.

Before critiquing the ontological presuppositions of this emerging literature, I want to highlight some of its important contributions. First, the critical scholars working within the corporeal, experiential, and the nascent phenomenological “turns” have developed a theoretical vocabulary which is an essential starting point for studying the body in war. Although notions such as “embodiment” require careful theoretical clarification—as I attempt in the following chapter—the initial statements outlining processes of embodiment have provided a basis from which critiques can build on. Second, this literature has provided an important normative rejoinder against “traditional” war studies. Although social scientific explanation requires a degree of abstraction which will invariably obscure the lived reality of what is being studied, this is especially problematic in the case of war where that lived reality presents such as a moral challenge.

C. A disillusioned ontology of war

Notwithstanding the contributions of the field of critical war studies which re-centres the study of war on the human body, I focus now on what I argue is a fundamental limitation of this emerging research agenda. Namely, critical war studies scholars tend overwhelmingly to predicate their theoretical contributions on a basic ontological conception of war which construes it as inherently destructive of human meaning. The result, as I now show, is that war is ironically disavowed from the human body; and the body is understood as embodying not war but only war’s effects.

The genesis of this disavowal is succinctly expressed by Scarry in her *The Body in Pain*. Scarry makes several crucial normative-ontological commitments which—to the extent that subsequent scholars rely on her—infuse and determine the scope of more recent critical literature (I conjoin “normative-ontological” because, for these critical scholars, the “ontology” of war is founded on moral judgements *about* war). We saw above that Scarry understands the essence of war as injury: ‘the central activity of war is injuring and the central goal in war is to out-injure the opponent’ (Scarry 1985, 12). From this starting position, Scarry understands the ‘structure of war’ as a ‘structure of unmaking’: War is an ‘[act] of destruction (and hence somehow the opposite of creation)’; it is ‘the suspension of civilization (and somehow the opposite of that civilisation)’ (Scarry 1985, 21). War, Scarry says, is ‘the

suspension of the reality of constructs' (Scarry 1985, 137). Thus, war is understood essentially as a destructive force which undoes and annihilates meaning.

Scarry's basic characterisation of war has been highly influential in the critical war studies literature. McSorley, for example, cites Scarry as a theoretical authority; and despite an otherwise broad ontological and empirical scope, and making reference to war as a generative force (McSorley 2014, 112), he follows Scarry to understand the essence of war as destruction – thereby analytically foreclosing all of war's other embodied experiences. This becomes clear in his reliance on James Mensch. In McSorley's words:

Mensch argues that what defines all *violent* phenomena is that they attack this fundamentally embodied ability to make sense of the world and one's own place in it. Violence is specifically destructive of the ability of the body to engage in sense-making and meaning-making, it 'undoes our deployment of the bodily "I can" in making sense of the surrounding world' (McSorley 2014, 108–9; citing Mensch 2009, 72–73)

In citing Mensch affirmatively, McSorley is expressing his underlying ontological commitment to an understanding of war as essentially destructive. His reliance on Mensch also highlights an important distinction which needs to be made between "war" and "violence". It would be far easier to make the case that violence is inherently destructive of meaning – although I still believe this is an overly reductive ontology of violence.²² Violence, however, is one aspect of war – and certainly its most destructive aspect; but as a social institution, war is much more than violence. Well beyond an ontology of violence, an ontology of war therefore needs to account for processes by which war is embodied as a meaningful structure.

In her advocacy of an experiential turn, Sylvester also follows Scarry in her understanding of war as essentially destructive. In her most extensive examination of war experience, for example, Sylvester argues that 'war is a politics of injury: everything about war aims to injure people and/or their social surroundings as a way of resolving disagreement or, in some cases, encouraging disagreement if it is profitable to do so' (Sylvester 2013a, 3–4, 2012a, 493). 'Injury may not be the only way that bodies experience war physically,' she concedes, 'but it is a central objective of war and its technology' (Sylvester 2013a, 67). Based on Sylvester's critique of the "traditional" war studies literature in IR, we

²² Although violence might be understood as the acutely *destructive* component of the broader ontology of war, one could equally argue that violence is "generative" in the sense that it is constitutive of the identities of those who inflict it, and of the truths (in Barkawi and Brighton's sense) that prevail in its aftermath. This is especially the case given that those who prevail in violence are typically those who come to define new societal regimes. Thus, even reducing violence to destruction seems methodologically limiting.

are therefore left with two extremes: On the one hand, we have mainstream theories which, as Sylvester shows, treat ‘war at a higher level of analysis, focusing very often on causes and correlates of war, on war strategies, weapon systems, national security interests and the like’ (Sylvester 2013a, 4); and, on the other hand, we have feminist-inspired critiques such as Sylvester’s which have, if not necessarily then at least in practice, reduced war to injury and destruction. Both of these extremes, moreover, commit to the Clausewitzian reduction of *war as politics*: For the former, war is a politics of strategy, while for the latter, it is a “politics of injury”.

This reductive ontology of war has in turn undermined the potential contribution of Narozhna’s phenomenology of war. As sophisticated as her problematisation of the existing literature is, Narozhna ultimately follows Scarry, McSorley, and Sylvester in understanding war as essentially antithetical to meaning. Thus, Narozhna summarises the methodological import of phenomenology to war studies in the following terms:

Viewed through the lens of existential phenomenology, war emerges as a complex social institution with the enormous power to transform essential elements of socio-political life by *disrupting*, through the *violent politics of injury*, the sense-making and agential capacities of the lived bodies, generating the loss of meanings, and disrupting pre-war social identities and roles (Narozhna 2021, 4, my emphasis)

From this perspective, a phenomenology of war reveals that ‘war is a fundamentally violent phenomenon whose principle purpose and outcome is the infliction of massive bodily injury’ (Narozhna 2021, 14). It should also be observed that the term “politics of injury” is not explained or theoretically contextualised by Narozhna.²³

Another of Narozhna’s theoretical authorities is from the existing literature on the phenomenology of violence, in particular the work of Michael Staudigl (2007b, 2007a). This inspiration is telling for two reasons. First, Staudigl advances the ontological pessimism of Scarry and understands violence as not only destructive of ‘our physical and bodily existence, as well as of its symbolic representations in language and other institutions’, that is, not only ‘of pre-given sense, but also [of] our *being-in-the-world*, i.e., our basic capacities for making sense’ (Staudigl 2007b, 235). Second, Staudigl’s own work focuses on violence and not on war; and as I suggested above, conflating the two

²³ To my mind, the term “politics of injury” is not clear unless one has already engaged with Scarry and Sylvester. As far as I can understand, the phrase takes the Clausewitzian reduction of war to policy and reduces it still further. Its validity therefore hinges both on the validity of Clausewitz’s reduction (which I address critically in the next chapter) and on the validity of reducing war to violent injury. As we will see, this forecloses an understanding of the ontology of war. It is, at best, an ontology of injury in war.

(as I believe Narozhna does), especially reducing the latter to the former, is methodologically invalid. War and violence are simply different objects of study.

These underlying ontological commitments then undermine the potential contribution of the rest of Narozhna's phenomenology of war. She begins by employing phenomenology to conceptualise people as possessing the potential for agency, meaning-making, and as being able to embody social identities and roles, only then to claim that war destroys all of these abilities. To be sure, war *can*, and *often does*, disrupt all of life's modes; but Narozhna has nothing to say about how war facilitates and can be an expression of agency, how it generates meaning, and how it creates communities and occasions the opportunity for meaningful intersubjective encounters. We are told, for instance, that war 'disconnects [people] from their pre-war identities' (Narozhna 2021, 16), but nothing is said of the identities that war generates – let alone how those identities for some may be *more* meaningful than their pre-war identities.²⁴ An understanding of this broader significance of war is foreclosed in her basic understanding of war as "alienating" and "disruptive". In light of Narozhna's phenomenological perspective, we might consider the question posed by anthropologist Neil Whitehead: 'Almost all theoretical and research approaches to violence begin with the assumption that, at its core, violence represents the breakdown of meaning, the advent of the irrational, and the commission of physical harm [...] But what if violence is considered ennobling, redeeming[?]' (Whitehead 2007, 40). And Whitehead is here only talking about violence; I will explore a similar question in the next chapter in relation to war.

Furthermore, the overarching normative-ontological commitment that war is inherently destructive of meaning leads Narozhna to obscure any difference of perspective upon war. Thus, she categorises together perpetrator, observer, and victim in the same theoretical frame: 'Whether they suffer violence as direct victims, witness it as passive observers, or commit it as active perpetrators, the lived bodies experience the alienating effect of the politics of war injury' (Narozhna 2021, 15). No distinction is offered between those who choose to commit violence and volunteer for war, at one end of the spectrum, and those upon whom violence is unjustifiably inflicted, at the other. We may indeed want to describe the existential predicament of the victims of violence as having been deprived of their phenomenological ability to *be* – but even this seems overly theoretical (and I am not sure what is morally gained here). It seems far from clear, however, that this account is theoretically accurate in terms of those who commit, or even those who observe, violence and the broader institution of war.

²⁴ On this point, see Levinas, who famously speaks of war as an 'ontological event' which results in 'a casting into movement of beings hitherto anchored in their identity' (Levinas 1961, 21). This insight of Levinas' work has been reflected on extensively in recent literature (see, for example: Brighton 2011; Barkawi and Brighton 2011; von Boemcken 2016, 235; Bousquet, Grove, and Shah 2020).

Furthermore, the idea that some may *believe* in the cause of violence and war—or the idea (in Bartelson’s terms) that some may exploit war’s ontogenetic potential—is lost entirely.

The methodological import of phenomenology, I will argue below, is not so much to reform our moral assessment of war, as Narozhna implies, but primarily to *understand* and *explain* war – which I argue are prerequisites for effective critique. Narozhna, however, offers only a pacifist phenomenology where war is understood as fundamentally disruptive and alienating. To understand war as antithetical to sense is, in my view, wishful thinking: If it were the case, war would not present the moral and political problem to human relations that it does.²⁵

In conclusion, in this subsection I have tried to unveil the underlying ontological assumptions about war which guide the construction of theoretical frameworks within the corporeal, experiential, and phenomenological “turns” in critical war studies. Although this literature has contributed useful terminology to understand embodiment, as well as providing a much needed normative, methodological, and indeed ontological indictment of the “traditional” literature, I have argued that the potential contribution of this research is limited by an understanding of war and violence as inherently destructive of meaning. There are two serious problems with this ontological understanding. First, unless one has a highly reductive understanding of war, it is simply not the case that war is inherently and universally destructive of meaning. To suggest so is to renounce the imperative to understand *how* and *why* war becomes meaningful for some people, and therefore to renounce an understanding of war on its own terms. In the last subsection of this chapter, I explore some broader literature which is conscious of this fact. Second, and more fundamentally, to claim or imply that war is antithetical to meaning is to misunderstand war as an ontological structure. Like all social structures, war is an ontic entity the very substance of which is meaningfulness. It is precisely the *meaningfulness* of war which structures human activity. The normative solution is not to reject this fact but to grapple with it and critique (primarily through exposure) the meanings which war entails. This is what I aim to do in the chapters that follow.

D. ‘Young soldiers marching lustily, Unto the wars’

It is methodologically unfortunate that dominant theoretical camps have encouraged us to extremes: On the one hand, there is a “higher” register of academic abstraction which often obscures the lived realities

²⁵ I should stress that I use the term “pacifist” in a non-pejorative sense. The term is of course politically charged, used by some to accuse others of naivety. This is not at all my intended implication. I seek, rather, to delineate the methodological scope of the studies under discussion; and within what I claim is their proper scope, I believe these studies are methodologically and normatively important and urgent.

of war; while on the other, there is a critical register which, although bringing the human being back into focus, focuses predominantly on the pity of war – on the embodiment of war’s negative effects. The embodiment of war itself, meanwhile, goes relatively untheorized. In this final section, I consider some broader war studies literature which I believe exemplifies moving beyond the pity of war to theorise war on its own terms. My aim is to establish the conditions for a fuller ontology of war. I also briefly discuss the ethical issues of doing so – in particular, the risk of romanticising war in academic research. In the next chapter, I will then be able to theoretically integrate this broader ontology of war with the human body and provide a basis for what I argue is a more thorough corporeal “turn” in war studies.

To open up an understanding of the broader range of war experiences and to demonstrate the spectrum of meanings that war entails, I want to begin by citing an autobiographical reflection by the military historian, John Keegan (1989, 12–13). As a way of encapsulating what he had understood as the “pity of war”, he offers the following poem, set in the context of the American Civil War, by Walt Whitman:

*Grieve not so, dear mother, (the just-grown daughter speaks through her sobs,
The little sisters huddle around speechless and dismay’d,
See, dearest mother, the letter says Pete will soon be better.
Alas poor boy, he will never be better, (nor may-be needs to be better, that brave and simple soul,
While they stand at home at the door he is dead already,
The only son is dead.*

*But the mother needs to be better,
She with thin form presently drest in black,
By day her meals untouch’d, then at night fitfully sleeping, often waking,
In the midnight waking, weeping, longing with one deep longing,
O that she might withdraw unnoticed, silent from life escape and withdraw,
To follow, to seek, to be with her dear dead son.²⁶*

Keegan presents this poem—which captures one of war’s acutest injuries—in order to reflect on his own sense pacifism: He tells us that such descriptions encouraged him to believe naïvely that ‘war could be ended for good’. He later became more pessimistic: ‘I should have read further in the poetry of the

²⁶ Walt Whitman, *Come Up From the Fields Father*. Cited by Keegan (1989, 12–13).

American Civil War,' he writes, 'should have found Herman Melville's lines on the massacre at Ball's Bluff' (Keegan 1989, 12–13):

One noonday, at my window in the town,
I saw a sight—saddest that eyes can see—
Young soldiers marching lustily
Unto the wars,
With fifes, and flags in mottoed pageantry;
While all the porches, walks, and doors
Were rich with ladies cheering royally.

They moved like Juny morning on the wave,
Their hearts were fresh as clover in its prime
(It was the breezy summer time),
Life throbbed so strong,
How should they dream that Death in a rosy clime
Would come to thin their shining throng?
Youth feels immortal, like the gods sublime.²⁷

Herein lies the moral problem of war – that war is often enticing, exciting, exhilarating, existentially gratifying, enchanting, beautiful, joyful, empowering, etc. There is simply too much evidence to ignore this aspect of war's experience; and any ontology of war must therefore include these experiences within its scope. As a social institution which extends into so much of the fabric of everyday life in society, war simply cannot be explained and understood by focusing on its tragic effects. Positivist social scientists have grasped this fact: With the methodological imperative to bracket their moral commitments, they are unhindered to see war on its own terms. Yet positivist researchers are methodologically and theoretically ill-equipped to examine embodied experiences – indeed, notions such as “embodiment” do not bode well with the positivist disposition. Critical scholars, meanwhile, have inaugurated and embraced such notions, but have tended—by and large—towards normative reduction. The result is that a large proportion of war's embodied experiences go unexamined.

It should be noted that not all critical theorists of war are guilty of the charge I am levelling.²⁸ Of those I have discussed above, for example, Tarak Barkawi is sensitive to this methodological problem. Discussing the issue of how “war” had been reclassified as “peace and security” within IR, Barkawi

²⁷ Herman Melville, *Ball's Bluff*. Cited by Keegan (1989, 13).

²⁸ For an interesting discussion, see Toros *et al.* (2018).

observes that ‘Force and war are most likely to be approached (if at all) within an ethical register, or with a concern for overcoming the problem of war rather than as direct objects of inquiry’ (Barkawi 2011, 703). Barkawi even hints at a diagnosis of the problem: ‘Rational inquiry and debate, embodied in the academy, were conceived as the very antithesis of force and as chief instruments in the progress of civility’ (Barkawi 2011, 706). War, meanwhile, is disparaged as an aberration of sensible and rational society. Bousquet, Grove, and Shah (2020) also recognise this problem. They describe a ‘normative queasiness’ in the literature; ‘the reticence to encounter war on its own terms, as a mode of thinking and a form of life,’ they write, ‘potentially forecloses the acquisition of new knowledges and dispositions through which agency can be wrested over martial phenomena’ (Bousquet, Grove, and Shah 2020, 102–3). The reason why Barkawi and Bousquet *et al.* can properly acknowledge this ontological logic is because their theoretical premises do not act like blinkers which obscure the broader structure of war.

Even those at whom I am targeting this critique do acknowledge the methodological necessity to capture the broader structure of war. Scarry, for example, recognises that ‘the more accurately the nature of war is described, the more likely the chances that it will one day be displaced by a structural surrogate’ (Scarry 1985, 143). Here, the limitation is not so much the methodological reasoning, but the underlying ontological understanding of ‘the nature of war’ which, as we saw above, is reduced to injury. Sylvester’s work also contains numerous interesting reflections acknowledging that ‘War experiences come in prosaic, profound, sickening, excruciating, and exhilarating ways’ (Sylvester 2011c, 127); yet these observations remain anecdotal, theoretically excluded by the logic of the term “politics of injury”. And Narozhna (2021, 17) insightfully (and, as I argue below, correctly) turns to the “everyday” experiences which constitute the breadth of war’s significance – only, however, to emphasise war’s alienating effects.²⁹

The methodological problem with the aforementioned studies, I believe, is that these scholars have predicated their theoretical frameworks on normative judgements about the reality of war. In the remainder of this section, I want to suggest that it is necessary to temporarily bracket moral convictions about the nature of war in order to understand it.³⁰ Such a bracketing is especially important when one

²⁹ I theorise the “everyday world” in a Heideggerian sense in Chapter 6.

³⁰ A similar argument was made by William James (1910) in a morally challenging essay in which he sets out his own anti-militarism. In what might be regarded as a highly critical argument, he sees militaristic sentiments as so deeply embedded in human *being*—indeed, ‘our ancestors have bred pugnacity into our bone and marrow’ (James 1910, 165)—that to simply insist on war’s horror is counterproductive – because ‘horror makes the thrill’ (James 1910, 169). According to James, what is needed, therefore, is a ‘moral equivalent of war’ which acknowledges

is trying to understand those who perpetuate war – those for whom war is essentially meaningful. In Part Two of this thesis, for instance, I will consider how the meaningfulness of war is constituted for the British soldier. In this case, the ways in which the soldier embodies war could not be understood by starting out with a disillusioned understanding of war – because the soldier, qua *soldier*, is himself *not yet* disillusioned. What is needed, therefore, is an ethnographic “respect” and a suspension of personal convictions. As Kenneth MacLeish notes, describing the experiences of soldiers is difficult

when so many accounts of war remain bound by the conceit that war violence is something that happens by accident or as a last resort, or that it is best spoken about in terms of cruelty, pathology, moral and ethical failure, and illegality. In liberal democracies, the power to kill and expose, to cause others to die or to keep them from death, is treated as an exceptional prerogative, whether those others are foreign enemies, civilians on the battlefield, or the soldiers we sent to fight (MacLeish 2013, 8)

Besides making the point that moral judgement can inhibit understanding, MacLeish is also suggesting that this “critical” tendency is linked to the privilege of Western liberal society – societies in which, as Giddens (1987) reasoned, violence is externalised, while the interior is pacified.

This bracketing of moral judgement raises important moral questions as well as related methodological issues: How does one acknowledge the *positive* dimension of war without validating it? How does one understand Romanticism without romanticising? There is a risk here, to be sure – since scholarship is discourse, and discourse, in its ontogenetic nature, is a form of power. Thus, every treatise on war which omits to mention the injury that war causes contributes to the abstraction and cleansing of war which, as Scarry (1985) has shown, is extremely problematic; and every treatise which attempts to convey the reasons for which war captivates and fascinates risks enticing some to be captivated and fascinated themselves. My contention throughout this thesis, however, is that if we are to effectively critique something we must first understand what it is that we are critiquing. Critiquing war, as such, presupposes understanding war on its own terms. This involves (temporarily) bracketing personal moral commitments and exploring the terrain of war’s meaningfulness. We must, for example, (imaginatively) feel the excitement of going to war, the sense of purpose that fighting a war can bring, and glory of victory in war, etc. Only then, after dialogically engaging with war, can we effectively

this inherent militarism and facilitates its expression in less destructive ways. This resonates with Scarry’s call for a ‘surrogate’ for war (Scarry 1985, 143).

undermine it as a social structure (to the extent that this is desired and necessary, of course). It is through empathic dialogue, in short, that protest can become effective critique.³¹

2.4. Conclusion

The main theoretical aim of this thesis is to ground the ontology of war in human *Being* – to theoretically and empirically demonstrate how war is embodied. In this chapter, I have therefore examined how the relationship between war and the body is understood in the existing war studies literature. I have focused on two emerging strands of research within the critical literature specifically, one which theorises war ontologically, and the other which aims to theorise the body in war. My aim has been two-fold: First, I have sought to draw out the merits of this existing research so that I can build on its terminological, theoretical, and normative contributions; and second, I have sought to highlight the limitations of this existing research as seen from a phenomenological perspective in order to situate the contribution of this phenomenology of war.

In terms of the contributions of this existing research, there are two primary features which I build on going forward. The first is a general methodological concern for the ontology of war. Following Barkawi and Brighton, I seek to say something fundamental about what war *is* (but I pursue this question from a phenomenological perspective rather than a Clausewitzian/Foucauldian one); and relatedly, I seek to theoretically develop their general claim that war is ontogenetic. Indeed, “ontology” and “ontogenesis” are central notions of this research which I aim to philosophically ground in a phenomenological method. The second major contribution is the imperative to methodologically integrate the body into war research and to provide the terminological and normative conditions for doing so. Here, I build on what might be described as the corporeal, experiential, and phenomenological “turns” in war studies.

Notwithstanding these important contributions, I have argued that war and the body remain ontologically disconnected within this critical war studies literature. In the case of Barkawi and Brighton’s Foucauldian ontology of war, this is because the role of the body is not made explicit; and

³¹ Although an interesting question, I have not discussed *why* many critical scholars have understood war in the narrow terms outlined above. There are interesting arguments that war and violence are generally regarded as an aberration by post-Enlightenment scholars who fundamentally see society in rational terms. See, for example, (Whitehead 2004, 61), who cites Sorel as saying ‘There are so many legal precautions against violence and our education is directed towards so weakening our tendencies towards violence that we are instinctively inclined [i.e., culturally predisposed] to think that any act of violence is a manifestation of a return to barbarism’. For a provocative argument along these lines, see Gray (2021).

when it is explicit it is a docile body which succumbs to the epistemic power of “War/Truth”. I argued that any theory of epistemic power—as a theory of knowledge—needs to account for how knowledge is embodied. In the next chapter, I aim to reveal the agency inherently involved in the process of embodying “War/Truth”. If the human body is not made explicit in this way, then the ontic structure of war risks becoming objectified as a mysterious force which “casts bodies into motion”. I then explored to what extent the corporeal, experiential, and phenomenological “turns” in war studies can account for these processes. Despite placing the body at the heart of their methodological frameworks, I argued that war itself is not the subject of these critiques – critiques which focus almost exclusively on how bodies are injured in war. This literature, as such, does not consider the embodiment of war but the embodiment of the effects of war; and war itself, meanwhile, tends to be reduced to violence. In neither of these strands of literature, therefore, have the body and war been sufficiently integrated. In what follows, I argue that a phenomenology of war can provide a foundational framework for integrating the ontology of war into human *being*.

3. The phenomenological ontology of war

Phenomenology is our way of access to what is to be the theme of ontology, and it is our way of giving it demonstrative precision. *Only as phenomenology, is ontology possible*
(Heidegger 1927, 60 [35], original emphasis)

3.1. Introduction

In the last chapter, I argued that recent theoretical developments in critical war studies have emphasised two important features of the ontology of war: That it is generative; and that—whatever theoretical abstractions we apply to it—war happens in and through human bodies. I then highlighted two main issues which I claimed limit the potential contributions of this emerging literature and which therefore need to be addressed: First, I argued that “ontology” remains an ambiguous notion and that this ambiguity risks essentialising war; and second, I argued that it is unclear how the body relates to the structural significance of war and its generative logics. In this chapter, I seek to theoretically clarify these issues by grounding the ontology of war and its generative logics in the human body. To do so, I propose a phenomenology of war by drawing on Heidegger’s existentialist and hermeneutic critique of phenomenology and its legacy in the works of Merleau-Ponty and Gadamer. The overarching aim is to theoretically elucidate how war is contingent on human existence, to examine the processes through which war is embodied, and to theoretically disclose the logics of how war, as a social institution, is historically continuous.

This phenomenology of war is developed in two main sections. In the first section (3.2), I explore the relationship between war and time. This involves, in the first of two subsections, critiquing what I characterise as an analytic understanding of war in time. On this view, the problem is posed as one of understanding the relationship between the particular war and “war in general”. I argue that this view invariably essentialises war by invoking a timeless essence which unites each particular war. As such, the “continuity” between wars exists in virtue of some transcendental essence. In the second subsection of section (3.2) I then propose a hermeneutic critique of this analytic approach. Drawing on Gadamer’s theory of time and the relationship between historical events, I show that the analytic posing of the problem misunderstands the nature of time and continuity, and thereby misunderstands the relationship between particular wars. I propose that war be understood as a tradition which is “handed down” and “taken up” between successive generations – processes which I argue constitute the continuity of war as a social structure.

In the second section (3.3), I then explore the relationship between war and *Being* – the technical Heideggerian notion for the way in which things exist in relation to humans. This section is divided into four subsections. In the first subsection, I lay the groundwork for an existentialist-phenomenological approach to the ontology of war. In particular, I explain the claim in the epigraph above that only as phenomenology is ontology possible. I thus theorise human *Being* as the fundamental state from which all ontologies must emerge. In the second subsection, I then theorise the essence of war as enmity. To do so, I draw on Heidegger’s notion of *Being-with* – a term which captures the social essence of human *Being*, since *Being* is always in relation to the Other. I invert this term to describe the fundamental structure of war as *Being-against*. This term allows me to capture the self-fulfilling and generative logics of enmity and, by implication, of war itself. In the third subsection, I draw on Merleau-Ponty’s contribution to phenomenology to ground *Being-against* in the human body. The first three subsections therefore offer a theoretical account for understanding how the human body is the site of the being-of-war. In the final subsection, I theorise how the body appropriates war through the aesthetic encounter with the tradition of war in any given context. I show how war is “taken up” as a project of *Being-in-the-world*, and how its historical continuity is thereby established in time. I then conclude this chapter with two reflections on the consequences that this phenomenology of war has for war studies generally – the first about the nature of theory itself in relation to war, and the second about agency in war. This chapter therefore concludes the theoretical aspect of this thesis; and Part Two which follows then explores this phenomenology of war through the case of the British soldier in Afghanistan.

3.2. War and *Time*

A. Introduction

Why does “war” reoccur in human history? And how do we describe and account for this reoccurrence? We might ask further questions (although, as I show below, such questions presuppose too much): What is the relationship between war in general and each particular instance of war; what, in short, is the “nature” of war? In this section, I argue that these last two questions confuse the analytic category which is imposed upon war and the historical logic of war itself. There is no such thing as “war in general” and war has no “nature” – if by “nature” it is implied that there is some transcendental essence of war— a Platonic form of True War—which stands outside of time and around which each instance of war orbits. War, rather, is a tradition; and it is continuous only because it is “handed down” and “taken up” between successive generations as a form and way of life, as a particular way of *Being-in-the-world* (i.e., as *Being-against*). War is continuous, in short, because we establish its continuity.

I develop this argument through a critique of what I term *analytic historicism* – a view which I define as the attempt to derive historical logics from historical categories. An exemplary case of analytic historicism in the recent war studies literature is the Oxford Leverhulme Programme on the Changing Character of War (CCW). As the name suggests, the CCW programme seeks to understand how war is changing through time – an endeavour which they claim requires accounting for that which unifies each changing instance. They therefore establish an analytic distinction between war’s “nature” and its “character”, between what is constant across wars and what is particular to individual wars. According to CCW, war is therefore “continuous” in virtue of its “nature”. I argue that this kind of analytic strategy tends to confuse the analytic category (i.e., “war in general”) with historical logic of war itself – as if “war in general” were a natural law of social life. This is not to say that historical categories such as “war in general” do not have an effect on the logic of history. They clearly do – as, for instance, each successive generation of warriors is taught the “laws of war”. Rather, it is to emphasise that the category does not stand outside of the course of history but is itself a product of history. When the analytic historicist of war speaks of war’s “nature”, they do so entirely in virtue of their historical perspective. Indeed, “war” might one day change entirely – in which case so will war’s “nature”. The “nature” of war, then, is a part of the tradition of war.

I develop this argument in two subsections. The first subsection reconstructs the foundational logic which underpins the CCW programme. My aim is not to dismiss this logic as methodologically flawed; indeed, this analytic method has been incredibly fruitful. My intention is to show, rather, that analytic historicism of the kind exemplified by the CCW programme should always come with stringent caveats about the metaphysical implications of the foundational methodological-analytic concepts it employs. My claim, further, is that this kind of analytic historicism cannot understand the logics of history itself and cannot account for the nature of continuity. In the second subsection, I then develop my argument—drawing specifically on Gadamer’s hermeneutics—that war is a tradition, and that time is not a “problem” to be overcome through timeless analytic categories, but rather that time is itself the foundation of continuity. Thus, I conclude with what seems a truism, but which needs to be stated theoretically: That war is continuous because it persists through time; and that we humans are the vehicle and source of that continuity. The following section (3.3) then explains the existentialist-phenomenological logics of this hermeneutic continuity.

B. The “nature” and “character” of war: A critique of analytic historicism

For the comparative analysis of war, one of the central methodological and philosophical challenges is to account for the relationship between particular wars and war in general. If we are to compare

individual wars, we first need to be able to say that they belong to some broader category of thing – i.e., “war in general”. One of the most thorough and comprehensive attempts within the recent literature to address this issue has been the core research produced by the Oxford Leverhulme Programme on the Changing Character of War (CCW). As an interdisciplinary project which has brought together historians, political scientists, philosophers, and practitioners (Strachan and Herberg-Rothe 2007, 10), the CCW programme examines—as the name suggests—how war has changed through time. In order to understand whether war has “changed” and in order to compare wars through time and space, the CCW programme postulates an analytic distinction/dualism between war’s “nature”, which is inherent and unchanging, and its “character”, which is constantly changing – although not necessarily in a linear way. Thus, “change” is understood in relation to a timeless and universal essence, a “nature”, and it is this essence which constitutes “continuity”. Although I concede that this analytic method is somewhat necessary to get the study of war in general off the ground, and is essential for comparative analysis in particular, I argue in this subsection that the postulation of a timeless essence inhibits an understanding of the deeper historical contingency of war as a social institution.

Before proceeding, let me state in general terms the analytic portrayal of the problem at hand (of accounting for “continuity” and “change”). To assess whether some general phenomenon (i.e., war) has “changed” across temporally isolated instances of that phenomenon (i.e., particular wars), it is necessary to first claim that the separate instances are indeed the same phenomenon at some fundamental level, despite their superficial differences. And in order to do this, it is necessary (according to analytic logic), to distinguish between *essential features* and *relatively superficial features*: The essential features are what make the instance belong to the category (type, or kind) of thing (i.e., war, as a general category); while the relatively superficial features may change within the parameters of the overarching category (thereby constituting individual instances of war). It is this kind of logic that underpins comparative historical analysis and sociological generalisation more broadly: In order to compare two things or generalise from one to another, it is necessary to emphasise certain essential features while abstracting from others. Thus, some *essence* is presupposed as the common ground upon which comparisons can be made.³²

³² This analytic strategy presumes that all instances of a kind are related by virtue of sharing some essence; another strategy, which is rather less analytic, might be to claim that instances of war are related not by some core essence, but more like a “family resemblance” in the Wittgensteinian sense. This is similar to the notion of tradition that I develop below – although *tradition*, I argue, has the virtue of accounting for the historical structure of war and its *persistent* continuity.

The CCW programme commits to this basic analytic logic – a logic which is either argued for or presupposed in much of the existing critical war studies literature.³³ The CCW programme sets out by recognising that “change” presupposes some notion of “continuity”: If there were no “continuity”, there could be no “change” because there would be no way of asserting that the instances which have changed belonged to the same category (Strachan and Scheipers 2011, 7). This is an important proposition and one which also underpins my hermeneutic approach below. It is their next logical step, however, which betrays their analytic commitments. In order to conceptualise and account for “continuity”, they propose a distinction—inspired by Clausewitz—between the “nature” and “character” of war – between a timeless essence and an historical manifestation:

Whatever our disciplinary background, we agreed that change and newness are not the same thing, and that change can be a reversal back to something which has existed before. We were therefore persuaded of the force of Clausewitz’s distinction between the *nature of war*, which has an *essential continuity, even integrity*, and the *character of individual wars, which vary* (Strachan and Scheipers 2011, 11, my emphasis; Cf., Strachan and Herberg-Rothe 2007, 3)

To understand the merit of the analytic distinction between “nature” and “character”, it will be worth discussing the CCW programme’s Clausewitzian inspiration. In particular, they highlight a passage at the end of Book One of Clausewitz’s *On War*—Book One is titled ‘On the Nature of War’—which ends with a reflection on the ‘consequences for theory’ (Clausewitz 1832a, I.1.§28, 89). In this famous passage, Clausewitz distinguishes between essential and relatively superficial features of war: On the one hand, war is described as a chameleon that changes some of its characteristics in each instance, while it is also described as being constituted by a deeper essence of war – a “paradoxical trinity” (more on which below). The divergence among English translations of this passage exemplifies the complexity of the analytic ideas being expressed, and it will be worth briefly recounting Strachan and Herberg-Rothe’s (2007) discussion of these translations.³⁴ According to Strachan and Herberg-Rothe,

³³ With the exception of Bousquet, Grove, and Shah (2020), all of the theorists I examined in the previous chapter (Chapter 2) implicitly or explicitly accept this analytic-historicist logic. Barkawi and Brighton, for example, pose the question in the following terms: ‘So, what can be said of the ontology of war, that fundamental character which manifests itself in each instance of war and is true of war in general?’ (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 134). Further, all of the normative-critical theorists I considered in the second half of Chapter 2 also posit some nature in general – namely, a “politics of injury”.

³⁴ I am not discussing the original German edition because my task is not textual analysis, but rather to investigate how the nuances between the various translations have given rise to the distinction between “nature” and “character” which has been so fundamental to the Changing Character of War programme, and which is a crucial steppingstone for the argument I make below.

existing English translations miss the relevant nuance of the point. The dominant and most recent translation by Michael Howard and Peter Peret, for example, reads: ‘War is more than a true chameleon that slightly adapts its characteristics to the given case. As a total phenomenon its dominant tendencies always make war a paradoxical trinity’ (Clausewitz 1832a, I.1.§28, 89, my emphasis). Strachan and Herberg-Rothe take the terms “more than” in this definition to imply that war is not, after all, like a chameleon (Strachan and Herberg-Rothe 2007, 3). They then credit an earlier translation by O. J. Matthijs Jolles as being more accurate, but as still missing the point. It reads: ‘War is, therefore, not only a veritable chameleon, because in each concrete case it changes somewhat its character, but it is also, when regarded as a whole, in relation to the tendencies predominating in it, a strange trinity’ (Clausewitz 1832b, I.1,§28, 18; cited in Strachan and Herberg-Rothe 2007, 3). For Strachan and Herberg-Rothe, the ‘implication here is that war may be a chameleon after all, changing its character but not its nature, which is made up of the trinity’ (Strachan and Herberg-Rothe 2007, 3).³⁵

The implication of the original, Strachan and Herberg-Rothe argue, is ‘that war may indeed be a chameleon, in that it *changes its nature slightly* in each individual case (its ‘character’), but not its *nature in general*, which is made up of the trinity’ (Strachan and Herberg-Rothe 2007, 3, my emphasis).³⁶ It is therefore in the nuance of this critique of the existing translations of Clausewitz that Strachan and Herberg-Rothe (and, it seems, the CCW programme more broadly) find inspiration for the distinction between the “character” and “nature” of war. According to their discussion, to change one’s “character” is to change one’s “*nature*” *only “slightly”*, but to retain one’s “nature in general”.

This distinction between the particular war and “war in general” (and the related distinction between “nature” and “character”) has both internal problems and more fundamental problems; and highlighting the internal problem will lead to the more fundamental critique. The internal problem—if we grant the validity of the distinction—is deciding where to draw the line conceptually and

³⁵ To my mind, the distinction between these two translations should not be overemphasised, since the key phrases “more than” and “not only” have synonymous meanings in this context. If there is a distinction, it seems to come, rather, in the second clause: Howard/Peret’s translation suggests that the trinity encompasses war’s chameleon nature, while Jolles’s translation suggests that war is merely “also” a trinity – implying a kind of two-fold structure. This is important, as we see below, for the validity of the “nature”/“character” distinction; indeed, I will argue that this whole semantic debate is indicative of the ultimate invalidity of these concepts to capture the unity of war’s structure. In particular, I will argue that it is simply in war’s nature to have a character; and that the analytic distinction is ultimately only methodological, and not indicative of anything ontological or metaphysical.

³⁶ Thus, Strachan and Herberg-Rothe offer their own translation: ‘war is *not only* a true chameleon, because it *changes its nature slightly* in each concrete case, but it is *also*, in its overall appearance, in relation to its *inherent tendencies*, a wondrous trinity’ (Strachan and Herberg-Rothe 2007, 3, my emphasis).

ontologically between “nature” and “character”. The problem here is that statements are either too general, such that they incorporate much more than war, or they are too specific, such that they conceptualise not war in general but historically particular war(s). Take, for instance, Clausewitz’s suggestion at the start of *On War*—one which Strachan and Scheipers (2011, 6) rely on—that war is essentially a *clash of wills*. The problem here is that many things other than war might be understood at some level as a clash of wills (such as duels, negotiations, and debates). In the opening sections of *On War*, Clausewitz is in fact more specific, but only to the detriment of a “general theory” and any pretence to universality. Seeking to avoid ‘pedantic’ and ‘literary’ definitions and instead ‘go straight to the heart of the matter’, he defines war as a ‘duel on a larger scale’ (Clausewitz 1832a, I.1.§2, 75). The term “duel”, however, already implies a distinctively *European* understanding of war – and a very parochial one at that, implying gender, class, honour, chivalry, etc. As such, it would be problematic to attempt to root a general and universal theory of war in such terms; it would also be problematic to claim that such terms could grant epistemological access to “war in general”.

This issue of drawing the line between “nature” and “character” is also present in the CCW programme’s conceptualisation of war. During its first meetings, they established five criteria for a definition: (1) war involves the use of *force*, and more specifically *fighting* (a definition Tarak Barkawi and Brighton also centre on); (2) there must be mutual contention (i.e., reciprocity); (3) ‘war assumes a degree of intensity and duration of fighting: scale matters, and skirmishes and border clashes are not necessarily war’; (4) fighting is not done in a private capacity [i.e., it is done in a *public* capacity]; and (5), relatedly, ‘war is fought for some aim beyond fighting itself’ (Strachan and Scheipers 2011, 7). Of these propositions, criteria (1) and (2) seem to be the best contenders for a “nature in general” of war: Without the wilful and reciprocal application of force, there could not be war; indeed, my own phenomenological definition of war in the following Section (3.3) is along these lines. Criteria (3) and (4)/(5), however, are ambiguous, each for different reasons: (3) is ambiguous because “scale” will always be relative (one person’s “war” is another’s “skirmish”³⁷); and (4)/(5) is ambiguous to the extent

³⁷ As a defining feature of war, “scale” is methodologically problematic; and for comparative analysis, (arbitrary) decisions will invariably need to be made. Most definitions of “war” are explicit that war entails hostile intentions which culminate in organised violence between two or more *groups* of individuals (such that a *feud* between two “private” individuals could only metaphorically be called a “war”). But how numerous the respective groups need to be can only be arbitrarily decided (and when a “feud” becomes a “war” is as inherently ambiguous as when a “stream” becomes a “river”). Furthermore, as is clear from attempts to statistically compare wars, arbitrary decisions also need to be made in terms of the intensity of the organised violence (usually in terms of the number of “battle-related deaths”). The Correlates of War project, for example, has attempted to study war “scientifically” by collecting data on various factors across wars, where “war” is defined as entailing at least 1,000 combatant deaths (Singer 1979); and more recently, the Uppsala Conflict Data Programme (UCDP) also works with this

that the notions “public” and “aim beyond fighting” (by which I assume “political” and “strategic” is implied) are themselves ambiguous. These last two criteria are essentially an iteration of the Clausewitzian reduction of war to *policy*: War, in this sense, is inherently instrumental; and any notion of war as an end in itself is ruled out.³⁸ Rather than constituting a universal “nature”, I contend that

basic criteria, defining war as ‘A state-based conflict or dyad which reaches at least 1000 battle-related deaths in a specific calendar year’ (Uppsala Conflict Data Programme 2021). Another challenge relates to delineating war in time: When does one war become two separate wars; how long must the peace be in-between; and how distinct must be the “causes” between the “separate” outbreaks of organised violence? Methodologically, I contend, all of these decisions are *axiological* and not ontological – guided, that is, by what is “valid” (i.e., worth knowing) to a given scientific community at a given time; and the propositions which emerge from these decisions are a reflection not of the “nature” or the “thing in itself”, but rather of *our* interests as researchers with particular epistemic demands.

³⁸ In his chapter in *The Oxford Handbook of War* entitled ‘Defining War’, Lawrence Freedman (2012) epitomises this view: War, Freedman argues,

involves organized, purposive violence, undertaken by one wilful group against another. [...] For the violence to be purposive it must be to a degree strategic. It must be geared to an end other than whatever satisfactions are derived directly from the experience of violence. Street fights, random displays of hostility, or ‘letting off steam’ do not count. There have always been claims that war appeals to an innate aggression yearning for an outlet, so that claimed purposes may be no more than pretexts. For some that may be true but if wars are simply viewed as acts of collective psychopathy then they become impossible to understand (Freedman 2012, 20–21)

This argument contains at least two logical weaknesses. First, a simplistic distinction is posited between “street fights” and “random displays of hostility”, on the one hand, and “purposive violence”, on the other. Although it is not clear what Freedman means by “random”, it is surely the case that all acts of premeditated and coordinated violence are guided by subjective “ends”; and there is therefore nothing to say that a street fighter’s acts are not “purposive”. Second, Freedman seems to reason that war *must be* “strategic” lest it become “impossible to comprehend”. To be sure, this is not an argument, at least not an explicit one; and the claim is presented more as a rhetorical observation. To the extent that it is an argument, however, it is logically invalid and unsound: It is logically invalid because the epistemological problem (that war *would be*, if it were *X*, “impossible to comprehend”) does not have an affect on the ontological/metaphysical problem (of whether or not war *is X* – i.e., whether it is essentially “strategic”). The conclusion, in other words, would not follow from the premise. Moreover, the argument is *unsound* because the apparent premise (that if, and the extent to which, war were *not* strategic, it would be impossible to comprehend) is clearly false. In social science, we can “comprehend” something in terms other than the “strategic” and “purposive” ends that social actors consciously hold in regard to their action. We can, for instance, theorise the significance of raw emotions, structural forces, or—as is here the case—existential logics – all of which are ontologically distinct from “strategic ends” and all of which can render the object of study (i.e., war) more comprehensible within academic discourse. This is not to say that war

criteria (4)/(5) is essentially a *European* understanding of war to the extent that the Clausewitz's political/instrumental conception of war emerged in the context of a rationalist European Enlightenment.

In one sense, these definitional/methodological/ontological issues are rooted at a conceptual level – specifically, in the ambiguity—and perhaps the disanalogousness—of the “character” metaphor (as well as in the philosophically obscure notion of “nature”). Although, colloquially, the term “character” implies something relatively superficial compared to “nature”, upon etymological and philosophical scrutiny, it is far from clear how they can be clearly dichotomised. The Oxford English Dictionary, for example, expresses this conceptual ambiguity between the two terms when it refers to the etymology of “character” as a ‘particularly distinctive nature’. This ambiguity is also contained in Strachan and Herberg-Rothe's discussion cited above when they say that to change one's “character” is to change one's “nature slightly” (Strachan and Herberg-Rothe 2007, 3). *How slightly?* is of course the question that follows.

This leads me to the more fundamental (metaphysical) critique of the “nature”/“character” distinction. This analytic distinction is rooted firmly in Platonic metaphysics where *instances* of a given thing are theorised as belonging to some transcendent Form which they approximate to some degree and of which they are only “copies”. Thus, in this case, it is implied that there is such a thing as True War around which all instances of war orbit. The problem of time is thereby overcome because instances *in time* stand in relation to a timeless ideal in virtue of which they are instances and in virtue of which they exist at all. “Continuity” is therefore grounded—paradoxically—in timelessness. I am not claiming that any of the theorists I have considered would accept this view; rather, I am claiming this is the genealogy of the kind of analytic historicism within which their basic working concepts are established. I am also claiming that this style of reasoning is not as benign as it might appear; and I would like to highlight two normative issues in particular: First, when our analytic categories imply that war has a transcendent “nature”, this in turn implies (pessimistically) that it is some kind of fate or external logic of human affairs – perhaps a secular version of the god of war to whose whim the temporality of human affairs is fated. Second, when “continuity” is rooted in a timeless “nature”, the

does not entail strategic ends, but only that war cannot be reduced to them. The fact that war, like all social action, is guided to some extent by purposive intentions is simply a truism, and does not tell us anything about the “nature” of war itself. To be sure, war formalises purposive ends as “strategy” (in a way that other forms of social action do not); but war is not ontologically distinct from other social activities in virtue of conscious purposes which are embodied by the given social actors. In the next Section, I argue, on the contrary, that war can be understood as an end in itself; specifically, I theorise “enmity” as the essence of war and as a self-fulfilling logic with its own *telos* of fighting.

actual *temporal* and *human* logics of continuity are obscured; specifically, the ways in which continuity is established between human generations as they embrace the particularities of war becomes analytically less important.

In conclusion, since the insightfulness and contribution of the hermeneutic understanding of the continuity of war is more clearly emphasised in relation to what I have described as analytic historicism, my aim in this first section has been to present an analytic “ontology” of war against which I can next construct the hermeneutic ontology of war as tradition. I do not want to claim that the hermeneutic approach is the only useful way to conduct an ontology of war, or that analytic historicism is invalid. The analytic approach, as exemplified by the CCW programme, is highly fruitful – especially for the empirical comparison of instances of war through history. The *postulation*—and I have argued that it is just that, and not anything ontological or even metaphysical about war—of a distinction between “nature” and “character” can enable comparative studies to hold certain variables constant (such as the presence of reciprocal violence), while comparing other variables (such as scale, technologies, cultures, strategies, etc.). Yet the limitation and danger of this method, I have argued, is that the analytic theory has a downward effect of the way we understand the entity itself – that we assume (problematically) that war has some eternal and necessary essence beyond our control and our responsibility. Analytic historicism has a tendency, in short, to hypostatise the historical category. It tends to assume that history/time itself is bound by the analytic distinctions offered by theory. In the next subsection, I seek to approach the historicity of war itself – to establish an understanding of the *real* “continuity” between the instances which tempt the analytic mind to postulate “war in general”.

C. The tradition and historicity of war: The hermeneutic structure of war

The basic error of analytic historicism, as I argued above, is to ground “continuity” in timelessness. Drawing on Gadamer’s hermeneutics, this subsection offers a hermeneutic account of continuity – one which is grounded in time. This method, as we will see, not only rejects the category of “nature” altogether, but also rejects the basic framing of the problem: Time is not a problem to be overcome through analytic gymnastics, but rather the very substance of continuity. I will argue that particular wars are strung together in their particularities as a genealogy of human behaviour; that war is a tradition which is “handed down” and “taken up” by successive generations – and it is this *passing along* which establishes continuity. War, as such, has no inherent “nature” which unites the instances of war. If there is some discernible “essence” or “nature”, this is a reflection of the historical perspective of the theorist and of their analytic decisions rather than war itself. As such, this hermeneutic approach largely avoids the risk of hypostatizing war as some timeless or extra-human essence and provides the historical basis

for understanding the logics by which the continuity and particularity of war is established – which I address in the next section.³⁹

Before I theorise this hermeneutic understanding of war's structural significance, let me offer a brief and hypothetical example to illustrate the difference between analytic and hermeneutic historiography. Imagine the following: The human race went extinct shortly after The Nuclear War (1962 CE), which made Earth uninhabitable for humans after destroying many of its natural systems. A Martian-anthropologist arrives on Earth in 2025 with the aim of researching the fate of the human species. They conceptualise “war” as their object of analysis, and they set out with the following preliminary research question: What is the relationship between the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC) and The Nuclear War (3rd – 6th December 1962 CE)? I want to propose that Martian-anthropologist would not adopt a comparative historical analysis to answer this question to the extent that this method is rooted in timeless analytic categories such as “nature” and “war in general”. These wars, I propose, are incomparable in their *essential* differences. Martian-anthropologist, rather, would be interested in how one *led to* and was *continuous with* the other; they would be interested in how war genealogically evolved, was adapted, “progressed”, etc., through human “civilisation”. Martian-anthropologist would find it methodologically unhelpful to postulate a timeless “nature” of war in relation to which these instances stand. War, they would recognise, was a *tradition*, a social institution which was embedded in human time and “handed down” from generation to generation; and as a tradition, it was ever-expanding in its capacities for destruction by drawing on and driving technological innovation. If there is an appropriate metaphor for the construction of a methodology, it is not that war had a “character” and a “nature”, but rather that it was a genealogy. For the human species, which “progressed” from “primitive” to technologically and socially “advanced” and “civilised”, war was a tragic *lineage*: Although grounded in essential traits of the species—including violent capacities and a proclivity for competition—its relevant drivers and consequences were ultimately contingent on social and material conditions as they evolved. The only “essence” or “nature” in relation to which these instances of war stand, Martian-anthropologist might conclude, is a tragic folly rooted in the human condition.

This hypothetical case highlights a few crucial points. First, these two events are not related in virtue of the concepts that Martian-anthropologist applies to them (since the events are categorically concluded). As Barkawi and Brighton (2019, 100–101) argue in their response to Bartelson (2018), the event of war necessarily exceeds the concepts applied to it. Second, neither are these two events related in virtue of some supposedly timeless abstract category. The category of “war” that Martian-anthropologist conceptualises is purely a methodological/linguistic *tool* which is imposed on

³⁹ I say *largely avoids* because this approach does have its own risks, which I discuss in the following section (3.3).

phenomena in order to make sense of them, and it is not representative of laws to which the events themselves are bound.⁴⁰ Third, this case shows that the events *are* essentially related, but that the relation is purely *historical* in the sense that the latter would not have happened without the former. And finally, if Martian-anthropologist is right that the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC) and The Nuclear War (1962 CE) are incomparable and that the “continuity” between them—their common ontological ground—is constituted in a genealogical *tradition of war*, then it follows that all wars before and in-between (and thankfully after) are likewise incomparable (in a strict sense); and that the “continuity” between them is constituted in the processes by which one leads to the other in space and time.

The fundamental difference between the *analytic* and *hermeneutic* approaches to historiography (and to the related notion of continuity) is their respective and underlying understandings of time. In order to make this point, it will be helpful to make somewhat of a caricature of the analytic historicist as represented by the CCW programme. For the analytic historicist, time constitutes a “gap” between the entities being compared: Two instances of war are separated by this temporal (and spatial) gap, and the analytic task then becomes to account for the “continuity” which bridges this gap and connects the two historical entities. As we saw above, this is done primarily through the invocation of a “nature” which stands outside of time and space and in virtue of which the two temporal/spatial instances are inherently related. “Continuity” is therefore grounded in a notion which is itself atemporal (i.e., “nature”); and the actual historical passage of time is methodologically relegated. Comparative historical analyses such as CCW therefore offer a *timeless comparison*; and as such they forego an *historical* understanding of continuity.

From a Gadamerian-hermeneutic perspective, and in stark contrast to the analytic historicism characterised above, continuity retains its inherently temporal status; indeed, the notion of *continuity* expresses the very essence of time. As Gadamer theorises, there is no “gap” between events which would need to be bridged by invoking timeless notions such as “nature”; the events, rather, are continuous in virtue of *being* in space and time, and of being spatially and temporally connected. Thus, time is not ‘a gulf to be bridged because it separates; it is actually the supportive ground of the course of events’ (Gadamer 1960b, 296). This hermeneutic understanding of time is in fact more common sensical: Although analytic historicism has had an enormous influence on the popular Western imagination to the extent that events are assumed to have timeless essences in virtue of belonging to some universal category (i.e., *War*), hermeneutic historiography is more common sensical in that it simply states that one “event” came after the other, and that the only thing which unites any two given

⁴⁰ This is not to say that categories do not have an effect on events, but that this effect is *discursive*; and that the category does not exist outside of the course of events as some Platonic essence but is a part of it.

“events” is that they are continuous in time and space. From this hermeneutic perspective a radically different understanding of war in time emerges: Time is no longer a problem to be overcome by a universal and abstract theory of war but is itself the fabric into which the significance of war is woven. As we will see more clearly in the next section, Being is never timeless but is constituted in and through time.

From this hermeneutic understanding of time emerges the notion of historicity.⁴¹ Gadamer’s hermeneutic critique is of what he characterises as historicism more generally: Historicism, he argues, tries to overcome time and advance towards objectivity; and as such, historicism forgets its own historicity – its embeddedness in time. Analytic theories of war, to the extent that they aspire to objectivity and universality, are also guilty of this. To reiterate one example I offered above: Although Clausewitz was influenced by a dialectical method (Strachan 2007), and although his general theorising emphasises the importance of context for theorising war (Beyerchen 1992, 67), he attempts—driven by the ambition of providing a universal theory of war—to capture war’s essence by describing it as a “duel” (Clausewitz 1832a, I.1.§2, 75). In this definition, Clausewitz has overlooked the historicity of the concept with which he aspires to universal applicability. If war remains duel-like today it is not because war is essentially and necessarily duel-like, but because contemporary war has been so heavily influenced by the particular tradition of war that Clausewitz has bequeathed to contemporary practitioners and scholars of war. There is, therefore, an historical dialectic between the theory and practice of war.

Building on this hermeneutic understanding of time and history (historicity), I want to theorise the temporal structure of war as *tradition*. As a social institution, war is embedded in and stretches through time as it is handed from generation to generation and mobilises new social and material forms. The particularity of each war and how those particularities are strung together through history should not be abstracted from but is precisely the object of study. The methodological challenge then becomes to account for how war is appropriated by successive generations and carried forth as a way of being and a structure of social life. As Gadamer writes, ‘The historical life of a tradition depends on being constantly assimilated and interpreted’ (Gadamer 1960b, 398). This line of argument will be taken up

⁴¹ I define historicism and historicity as follows: As discussed above, to *historicise* is to constitute knowledge of history by imposing historical categories upon the past. For example: To call Waterloo an “event”, to delineate it spatially and temporally, and to define its key “junctures”, etc., is to historicise it. *Historicity* is the historical quality of the thing as such; it is the way an entity has been *effected* and *determined* by history (to use Gadamer’s (1960b, xxx) terms. To inquire into a thing’s historicity is to inquire into the way it has been historically constituted. “Waterloo”, for example, was a battle which was historically determined in the sense that it mobilised cultural and material resources which were unique to and contingent on that moment in time when “Waterloo” occurred. For a general overview of the notion of *historicity*, see Gjesdal (2014).

again at the end of the next section; but before the ‘historical life of tradition’ can be understood, it is necessary to turn to the phenomenological conditions that make embodiment possible. It is necessary, that is, to establish the essential connection between ontology and the body.

D. Conclusion

In this section, I have tried to show how the question “What is war?”—which, as Barkawi and Brighton argue, is essential to war studies—tempts the analytic mind into presupposing a timeless and universal essence of war. This essentialisation seems to be a pervasive tendency, even in *critical* war studies. Yet, if *being* is necessarily *being in time*, as the hermeneutic phenomenologists have shown, then we should not expect to find a timeless essence behind any particular *being*. Building on this logic, I have tried to show in this section that the quest for an ontology of war should not be led astray by atemporal analytic presuppositions. I have not argued that analytic reasoning is invalid: As I have pointed out, timeless analytic categories such as “nature” are not only useful for comparative analyses of war but are essential to get research off the ground in the first place. I have argued, rather, that it is methodologically and normatively important that we do not let the analytic category reify and objectify the historical entity. Drawing on Gadamer’s hermeneutics, I argued that the significance of war is rooted in time and in historical processes; and the continuity which connects *actual* wars together is not a timeless ideal but time itself. Drawing on Gadamer’s hermeneutics, I have therefore theorised the temporal structure of war as tradition – a notion which captures the processes through which the institution of war is “handed down” (bequeathed) and “taken up” (appropriated) through time and between generations. This theorisation, in turn, points to the body as the site where the significance of war takes root – to bodies which experience and enact war and thereby carry it forth and establish its continuity. So far, however, “tradition” remains detached from bodily and existential processes, and it is to this issue that I now turn.

3.3. War and *Being*

A. Introduction

By theorising war as tradition, I have sought to overcome the atemporal implications of the analytic and abstract categories through which war is conventionally understood. Such categories, I have argued, risk hypostatizing war as some external and timeless force, thereby overlooking its inherent historicity – its contingency and continuity. Yet “tradition”, as a methodological notion, also runs the risk of hypostatizing war. Even when it is emphasised that tradition is embodied, as I have done, it might still

be the case—as, for instance, poststructuralist theories imply—that bodies are docile and passive receptacles of this tradition, and that tradition is therefore some exogenous logic, spirit, or principle of history. It is therefore necessary to theoretically account for the processes through which war tradition is embodied. It is necessary to develop a theory of embodiment which does not characterise the body as a passive receptacle, but which instead accounts for the *activity of embodying* war – whether by enacting it as the warrior, being fascinated/repulsed by it as the observer, or being intrigued by it as the scholar. To do so, I draw on some of the central components of phenomenology as developed by Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Gadamer.

This section is divided into four subsections. I begin, in the first subsection (A), by considering how Heidegger’s notion of *Being-in-the-world* can lay the basis for an understanding war as embodied. As the epigraph to this chapter suggests, all ontology for Heidegger is contingent on the ‘fundamental ontology’ of the human *Being*, or what he calls “Dasein”. *Being*, as such, is a ‘constitutive state’ which spawns Self, World, and Other. Thus, Heidegger shows that understanding ontology requires understanding ourselves as the condition for the possibility of ontology. Heidegger’s notion of *Being* will also be the basis for the empirical Chapters to follow, where I examine across three chapters respectively the British soldier’s embodied *Being*, his *Being-in-the-world*, and his *Being-towards-death*. Having lain the basis in this first subsection for understanding the phenomenological condition for the possibility of ontology in general, in the second subsection (B) I then theorise the *fundamental structure of war* as enmity. I do this by inverting Heidegger’s technical term *Being-with*—which refers to the social essence of *Being*, i.e., that *Being* is necessarily *Being-with* an Other—to theorise the phenomenon of enmity as *Being-against*. I argue that *Being-against* captures the constitutive/generative logics of war. By grounding the existential structure of war in *Being*, and more specifically in *Being-against*, these first two subsections thereby provide the phenomenological basis for placing the human *Being* at the heart of the ontology of war. Heidegger does not, however, theorise the body directly, and here I turn to Merleau-Ponty in the third subsection (C). Merleau-Ponty shows that *Being-in-the-world* is necessarily disclosed through the body; and that the body, as such, can be understood as the basis of all ontological Being and all ontology. This leads into the final subsection (D) where I tie together this section with the previous section. Specifically, I return to Gadamer’s hermeneutics and his notion of the aesthetic encounter to theorise how the body aesthetically encounters war – how it *interprets* the heritage of war, a process which is existentially tantamount to appropriating meanings into the body (i.e., embodying). The body thereby becomes a *war body* – a *Being* which carries forth the tradition of war and establishes its existence in time.

B. Fundamental ontology: *Dasein*, and *Being-in-the-world*

If ontology is the *study of that which exists, i.e., of being*, then the *ontology of war* is the study of that which war *is*. Ontology, as such, presupposes a theory of existence, a theory of what it is to *be*, or of *being*. Yet, when we ask a further question of what it means to exist in the first place, the question descends into metaphysical obscurity (which is undoubtedly why it tends to be avoided). As discussed in the previous chapter, for example, in the social sciences the term “ontology” is conventionally used more colloquially to simply imply *the existence of something* (rather than the study of that existence *per se*) – a colloquialism which is indicative that existence itself has been taken for granted. The result is that *how* that which exists *does exist*—i.e., the conditions for the possibility of that existence—goes unexamined; and so, as I argue below, do the implications of that existence. Usually, philosophical realism is invoked (explicitly or implicitly); but as I have been arguing, realism is itself vague and does not sufficiently account for the relation between embodiment and ontology. Drawing on Heidegger’s notion of ‘fundamental ontology’ (Heidegger 1927, 34 [13]), I argue in this subsection that the ontology of war should be grounded in the phenomenological notion of *Being*. As I show in the following subsections as well in the empirical chapters which follow, this phenomenological grounding can facilitate clarity of how war is embodied and of how this embodiment should be studied.

To elaborate Heidegger’s fundamental ontology, it is necessary to begin with his notion of “*Dasein*”. *Dasein* is basically Heidegger’s term for “human being” in that it is meant to capture that which is (existentially and phenomenologically) distinctive about human existence. Like other things, *Dasein* exists in the sense that it is a *Being*; yet, *Dasein* exists in a particular and unique way in the sense that it is the kind of *Being* for whom its own *Being* is an issue (Heidegger 1927, 32 [12]). Because it has the innate capacity to *understand itself* as existing, *Dasein* therefore exists in a ‘constitutive state’ (Heidegger 1927, 32 [12]).⁴² In this sense, if “ontology” is that which *Dasein* perceives as existing outside of itself as part of its world, then *Dasein* is itself a kind of ‘pre-ontological’ entity, or a ‘Being-

⁴² Da-sein translates literally as *Being-there*. Heidegger defines this central term as follows: ‘This entity which each of us is himself and which includes inquiring as one of the possibilities of its Being, we shall denote by the term ‘*Dasein*’ (Heidegger 1927, 27 [7]). In a complex passage that summarises some of his key ideas, Heidegger writes: ‘*Dasein* is an entity which does not just occur among other entities. Rather it is ontically distinguished by the fact that, in its very Being, that Being is an *issue* for it. But in that case, this is a constitutive state of *Dasein*’s Being, and this implies that *Dasein*, in its Being, has a relationship towards that Being—a relationship which itself is one of Being. And this means further that there is some way in which *Dasein* understands itself in its Being, and that to some degree it does so explicitly. It is peculiar to this entity that with and through its Being, this Being is disclosed to it. *Understanding of Being is itself a definite characteristic of Dasein’s Being*. *Dasein* is ontically distinctive in that it is ontological’ (Heidegger 1927, 32 [12], original emphasis. Cf., 1927, 274[231]).

ontological' (Heidegger 1927, 32 [12]). Dasein, as such, is a 'fundamental ontology', or a condition for the possibility of ontology in general; and without Dasein there would be only a meaningless universe (at least in the unique way that human beings experience meaning, i.e., ontologically, as existing). It is for this reason that Heidegger insists that any study of ontology must first understand Dasein ontologically (Heidegger 1927, 34 [13]), and why 'We are ourselves the entities to be analysed' (Heidegger 1927, 67 [39]).⁴³

Yet even though its definitive capacity is to be a *Being* that makes an issue of its own being, Dasein does not spend much—if any—of its time merely concerned with its own existence. On the contrary, it is in Dasein's nature to be directed away from itself as such, and towards its world. Indeed, it is only from the world itself that Dasein can recognise that it itself exists as a 'pre-ontological' entity – as a *Being* that makes an issue of its own *Being* (Heidegger 1927, 37-8 [16]). Thus, for Heidegger, Dasein cannot recognise itself in universal, timeless, and absolute terms, but only from the vantage point of its everyday worldly existence and its particular historical circumstance (Heidegger 1927, 37-8 [16]; 42 [20]; 43 [21]; 85 [58]).⁴⁴ Dasein, therefore, is essentially *Being-in-the-world* – because without a world Dasein is inconceivable (as I explore in the following subsection, Dasein's essential state of *Being-in-the-world* also implies that it is essentially a social Being, a *Being-with*, because the world is essentially a collective space).

To achieve a better understanding of what Heidegger means by *Being-in-the-world*, it will be helpful to break it down, as he does, into its individual components—into *Being*, *Being-in*, and the *world*—and then to reformulate it as *Being-in-the-world*. *Being*, as the term implies, is the mere fact of existence. But to exist, *Being* must imply *Being-in* (i.e., in something). From a phenomenological perspective, however, *Being-in* has a particular meaning. As has already been implied, Dasein is not

⁴³ Heidegger's theory is of course anthropocentric, and my application of this theory to the study of war in turn entails a distinctively human ontology of war. This is not to say that other earthy (or extra-terrestrial) creatures do not engage in warfare; as zoologists have shown, chimpanzees engage in a type of "organised violence" which fits with many of the basic criteria offered by many definitions of war – such as reciprocal hostile intentions between groups (Goodall 1986). The anthropocentric premise of this phenomenology of war, however, is that *human* war is a unique phenomenon; and that it needs to be studied at the level of *human* ontology and human history.

⁴⁴ This is what makes Heidegger's phenomenology hermeneutic and not transcendental: Although Dasein's pre-ontological nature is implicit in its everyday existence, it cannot overcome this everyday existence to grasp the "bare" nature of existence itself (Heidegger 1927, 62 [38]). In a more colloquial sense, Dasein is not the kind of thing that can have a view from nowhere.

“in” the world as a thing is in a box – thus, Dasein is not a ‘subject’ and the world is not an objective space. *Being-in-(the-world)* is to ‘dwell’ in the world (Heidegger 1927, 80 [54]); it is to be ‘involved’ with the world and to thereby constitute it as a world (Heidegger 1927, 138 [104]). The world, as such, is not characterised by the geometric space of physics, but is a phenomenal world, a world of ‘*existential spatiality*’ (Heidegger 1927, 83 [56]). “*Being*”, “*in*”, and “*world*” are therefore a necessary unity, which is why they are hyphenated into *Being-in-the-world*.

In conclusion: In this subsection I have theorised the phenomenological condition for the possibility of ontology – namely, a human *Being*—a constitutive entity—which ‘projects its Being upon possibilities’ (Heidegger 1927, 188 [148]) and which thereby brings those possibilities into *Being* as Worlds and Subjects. What, then, are the implications for the ontology of war, and for the study of war more broadly? Most importantly, Heidegger’s fundamental ontology of *Being-in-the-world* provides the theoretical basis for grounding the ontology of war in the human condition. War is not some mysterious and exogenous force or logic of the universe; war, rather, is simply one of Dasein’s possibilities, a way of *Being-in-the-world*. War is something that humans, through their constitutive powers, institute in human relations. As I explore below, this phenomenological approach to the ontology of war forces methodological attention on the processes through which warriors and warzones are mutually constituted through time.

C. Fundamental structure of war: Being-against (or, enmity)

We saw above that Being is necessarily *Being-in-the-world* since, without a world, Being is inconceivable both to itself and to others. As we saw, this implies also that Being is necessarily *Being-with* Others, since the World is invariably and necessarily a social space. Therefore, ontology, as Dasein’s inherent possibility, is necessarily social ontology – it is a structure of existence which emerges from social interaction. In this section, I apply this intersubjective logic to an understanding of the social ontology of war. In particular, I explore the essence of war as clashing wills from a phenomenological perspective; and I define the existential condition of these clashing wills as enmity or—to invert Heidegger’s notion of *Being-with*— as *Being-against*. I argue that *Being-against* (as a way of *Being-with* and as the *Being* of enmity) is the fundamental meaning of the phenomenon of war in the sense that it is the existential state from which derivative ontological structures of war—warriors, warfare, and warzones—emerge. From here, I reflect on and try to clarify the significance of fighting within the ontology of war. Although it is true, as Barkawi and Brighton observe, that ‘Fighting is that which thematically unifies war in general and in particular’ (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 135), I argue that fighting is the wrong variable to understand war’s existential and generative logics and that it should therefore not be centred at the heart of the ontology of war. Fighting, which I understand as the climactic

manifestation of enmity in discourse, is merely how we discern the occurrence of war; but it is the *Being-against*—as that which gives rise to and structures fighting—which constitutes war’s generative potential. *Being-against*, as such, can be understood as the existential structure both of *material* war and of the imaginary *idea of* war from which material war emerges. *Being-against*, as such, is the essential condition for the possibility of war.⁴⁵

i. The social structure of Being: Being-with

Before exploring the phenomenology of enmity, it is necessary to outline some key phenomenological notions used to understand social ontology (or intersubjectivity) more broadly. As we saw above, Dasein (Heidegger’s term for the distinctive existence of the human *Being*), does not have a view from nowhere but is, rather, embedded in its existential, material, and social circumstance. This means that Dasein discovers its Self, its World, and the Other in a mutually constitutive way – the unity of which might be described as *Being-in-the-world-among-one-another*. Thus, Dasein is a thoroughly worldly and social entity.

For Heidegger, Dasein therefore discovers itself not from the vantage point of an autonomous and authentic “I” but rather from the “They” – the publicness within which each Being has “fallen” and lost its more “authentic” self (Heidegger 1927, 220 [175]).⁴⁶ Thus, it is ‘In terms of the “they”, and as “they”,’ Heidegger writes, that ‘I am ‘given’ proximally to ‘myself’ (Heidegger 1927, 167 [129]). *Being-in-the-world*, then, is always *Being-with* Others or *Being-among-one-another* (Heidegger 1927, 156 [120]; 155 [118]; 166 [128]). As such, the ontology which is made possible by phenomenology is essentially a *social* ontology – it is an ontology which is concerned not with the individual and autonomous act of *Being* as a pure and divine assertion of Self, but with the existential state of *Being-with*. The existential structure of the World, then, can be understood as the existential web which is strung between the various *Beings* which are themselves in and towards that World; the World is the

⁴⁵ Heidegger advocated a similar idea in a 1933/34 lecture series, where he describes the essence of war as ‘standing against the enemy’ (cited in von Boemcken 2016, 232). I have been unable to find an English translation of the relevant text; but based on von Boemcken’s own analysis, this “standing against” is meant literally, i.e., as combat. My aim here, however, is not to interpret Heidegger’s later (political) reflections which build on his earlier phenomenology; I aim, rather, to develop a phenomenology of war which builds on what I believe are the insights of his early philosophical work. I therefore consider Heidegger’s political affiliations a separate issue.

⁴⁶ “Authenticity” remains a (rare) possibility for Heidegger in that the “I” might overcome the “they” within which it has “fallen”, been “thrown”, immersed and involved itself. I explore this possibility in Chapter 4 where I argue that Harry Parker, the author of *Anatomy of a Soldier*, manages to speculatively step out of his Self, away from the “I” which is blind to the phenomenological conditions of his embedded existence. I suggest that existential and bodily trauma, in his case, facilitates this kind of “authenticity”.

intersubjective structure which constitutes the “they” within which each individual “I” finds itself. Ontology must therefore examine the ways in which *Being-with* constitutes the essence of phenomena.

ii. *The social structure of War: Being-against*

The social essence of the structure of war is captured by Clausewitz in the opening sections of his *On War*. The activity of war, he observes, is not only reciprocal in the sense that it requires two or more opposing parties, but it is also “interactive” – a term which captures the processes of reflective reciprocity through time. Clausewitz establishes that war—its course and outcome—can never be unilaterally determined by one side because war is never an isolated act but rather involves a succession of acts, after each of which each party will invariably re-evaluate their strategy and willingness to fight. As such, war is a dialectic which unfolds in time; and the structure of any given war will always be constituted in a synthesis of the respective wills and strategies which evolve over the course of “events” in relation to one another (Cf., Strachan 2007; Beyerchen 1992). The ontology of war, then, must prioritise the *social* for two reasons: Firstly, because war implies the reciprocity of ‘hostile intentions’.⁴⁷ Secondly, and more fundamentally, because war always entails an interactive dialectic which, as is already implicit in Clausewitz’s analysis, is constitutive to some extent of ‘hostile intentions’ themselves – because the re-evaluation of the will to fight occurs *in response* to the actions of the “enemy” (and, as I argue below, the “enemy”, simultaneously, is constituted in the will to fight). There is therefore a mutually constitutive (self-fulfilling) logic at the heart of enmity – implying that war itself is, at least to some extent, self-perpetuating.

These mutually constitutive logics of enmity and war can be elucidated through a phenomenological understanding of enmity as *Being-against* – a notion which captures the existentially constitutive state of embodying what Clausewitz refers to as ‘hostile intentions’ towards the Other. *Being-against*, as such, can be defined as the existential structure of enmity. Just like the general existential state of *Being-in-the-world-among-one-another* is constitutive of Self, World, and Other, then *Being-against*, as a particular way of *Being-in-the-world-among-one-another*, is constitutive of particular entities of war – namely Warriors, Warzones, and Enemies. As such, *Being-against* is the phenomenological essence of the ontology of war.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ For Clausewitz, ‘hostile intentions’ constitute the ‘universal element of war’ (Clausewitz 1832a, I.1.§3, 76).

⁴⁸ As mentioned above, this is true of both material (actual) war between living beings, and of imaginary war (as a societal discourse, an anticipated state, or as a fictional/mythological narrative). In many cases, *Being-against* is not embraced by the first person but is rather embraced in the form of the *Other-against-the-Other* – such as when one reads a war novel or visits a battlefield site. In this case, although the reader/viewer/tourist/spectator does not necessarily take sides in the war, they still constitute an Other who observes and embodies war. Such

To *Be-against*—as a protagonist *in war*—is necessarily to *Be-against-an-Other*; yet the “Other” does not necessarily pre-exist the state of *Being-against* but might be a hypothetical—existentially anticipated—Other, waiting to be constituted as Other as such. In order to explain this, consider first an alternative (call it analytic) understanding of enmity: From this perspective, enemies are understood as autonomous units which have incommensurate wills in a finite space and which are therefore bound to clash. This view conceives enemies like celestial planets on a converging collision course: Their respective forces are pre-established and absolute (i.e., they are all they can be), and the outcome—if knowledge were infinite—could be entirely foreknown and accurately predicted. As we saw above, Clausewitz has already undermined this view by recognising the inherently dialectical nature of interaction in war. Yet, the dialectical implication of Clausewitz’s argument can be taken much further to understand how war is a self-fulfilling existential logic to the extent that enmity, as a dialectical logic of social existence, is constitutive of enemies as such.

This logic can be clarified through the phenomenology of *Being-against* which, as a particular mode of *Being-with*, is a constitutive state which inherently craves something against which it can *Be*. Take, for example, the case of the professional soldier in the contemporary Western nation – a modern warrior archetype of *Being-against*. The *soldier-to-be* often enlists in the military without an enemy as such, but rather vows to fight the nations enemies as determined by the sovereign during the course of their “service”. Yet to *Become* the soldier, the citizen must existentially embrace the *prospect of enmity* – because the “soldier”, both as an ideal and as an actual way of *Being-in-the-world*, is inconceivable without the notion of an enemy. In practice, of course, when there is no actual enemy, the “enemy”—as the Other against which the soldier must *Become*—will be manifest in the discursive heritage of the nation’s former enemies (in the case of the contemporary British soldier, for example, this might be “Taliban”, “IRA dissident”, “Argie” (Argentinian), or Nazi). But in this case “enemy” remains, to a large extent, an empty signifier – an ideal against which one can *Become* as a *Being-against*. Even in the case where there is an actual concrete enemy, the *soldier-to-be* will still not “know” this enemy and must embrace some ideal of “enemy” within which the concrete characteristics of the actual enemy can be contextualised, understood, and embraced as they are discovered in the course of actual war (and the soldier will never “know” the enemy in an absolute sense, just as any *Being* will never truly know an Other).⁴⁹ *Being-against* therefore constitutes an existential “space” within which some Other can

observation, moreover, is still existentially constitutive since *Being-against* is reified as a valid way of *Being* and war is therefore validated as a meaningful existential structure. For an examination of how war is phenomenologically constituted by the battlefield tourist, see Gilks (2021a).

⁴⁹ Although I am here making a theoretical argument, many empirical examples could be given. In the empirical context of this study, for instance, it has become clear that the British soldier—from the lowest to the highest

manifest itself as *My enemy*. From here, it is clear to see how enmity can become a self-fulfilling (constitutive) logic of war.⁵⁰

Besides constituting enemies, *Being-against* should also be understood as constituting the geographic “space” within which enemies may clash. At one level, for example, battlefields do not pre-exist the clashing enemies which institute a given geographic area as a battlefield – the act of fighting, in this sense, is a kind of speech act. Acts of war, however, do not just “institute” space with certain epistemic properties which enable us to discuss the “event” in hindsight. More fundamentally (i.e., phenomenologically), *Being-against* is constitutive of “space” as such. This can be understood by returning to the constitutive capacities of the state of Dasein. As we saw above, the (phenomenal) world within which Dasein discovers itself does not pre-exist Dasein’s experience of self-discovery (just as *Dasein* does not pre-exist the discovery of the world). Thus, we saw that *Being* is necessarily *in-the-world*. The world, therefore, is the reflective image of any given *Being* as Dasein ‘projects its Being upon possibilities’ (Heidegger 1927, 188 [148]) – where one such possibility is the World in which one can *Be* a certain way. Furthermore, we also saw above that both World and Self are necessarily discovered from within a social context. This means, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, that the world is ‘the correlate not only of my consciousness, but also of every consciousness *that I might encounter*’ (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 354). Returning, then, to the case at hand, we can see that *Being-against* is the condition for the possibility of war “spaces” as such – of “battlefields”, “warzones”, and “theatres of war”, etc. Indeed, the theatre analogy here is telling: It is the act of walking onto the stage with one’s fellow actors and enacting a given character and drama that constitutes the stage as a stage (as well as the character as character). Thus, it can be seen how enmity, understood fundamentally as *Being-against*, is constitutive of the existential “spaces” *through which* (rather than “in which”) war can and must unfold.

Furthermore, *Being-against* also sheds light on the inherently contested nature of the space that war entails. The existential spaces that *Being-against* constitutes cannot be settled until hostilities are over (and even then, space invariably remains contested). Again, this is to imply much more than the fact that the victor typically earns the right to *institute* the battlefield, such as by designating its name (e.g., the “Battle of Waterloo”, as opposed to “La Belle Alliance” or “Mont Saint-Jean”). It implies,

ranking—never really knew the “Taliban” (Martin 2014); and it could be argued that his enmity was, to a large extent, a collective imaginary, an existential projection of the nation.

⁵⁰ An analogy would be the romantic who craves love in a raw and open way, and who then invites an Other to become *their lover*; just like lovers constitute one another as lovers, enemies constitute one another as enemies. These logics will be explored more in Chapter 4 where I discuss, among other things, one British soldier’s sentiments of enmity.

moreover, that it is the very World itself which is being fought over – a world which encompasses all meaning, including ethical principles, social values, and political facts. Although not unique to the domain of war, this contestation of existential space is exemplified through the constitutive logics of *Being-against*; and *Being-against* can facilitate an understanding of how space *comes-into-being* through a type of social contestation which is rooted in enmity. In Chapter 5, I consider the British soldier's war scene in Afghanistan as an existential space of war; in particular, I discuss how the British soldier, who in this case is manifest and realised through *Being-against* the Taliban Other, constitutes a Romantic and Orientalist world (*Afghan*) within which he can realise his Self as a British Soldier.

iii. Typologies of enmity: The example of Carl Schmitt

The ontology of war I am developing here is primarily concerned with what I regard as the fundamental (*existential*) structure of enmity (and thereby with the fundamental structure of war), and with how this structure constitutes a possible way of *Being-in-the-World*. Thus, I am concerned with the existential conditions for the possibility of war/enmity. Enmity, however, will always take a particular form within the sentiments of a given warrior and between opponents. In this part, I want to briefly consider Carl Schmitt's tripartite typology of enmity as an example of the kinds of distinctions that can be made between different forms/types of enmity as they emerge *in-the-World*. All such forms/types, I argue, are made possible by the underlying existential structure of *Being-against* which they manifest as concrete instances.

In his *Theory of the Partisan*, Schmitt (1963) theorises a distinction between “conventional”, “real”, and “absolute” enmity – each of which is associated with different actors, agencies, and historical epochs.⁵¹ “Conventional” enmity, which Schmitt sees as emerging in the Napoleonic era and as being associated with rational European Enlightenment culture (especially with *jus publicum europaeum*), is embraced by the state and is limited and regulated by the state system. In this type of enmity, it is the “state” which possesses agency by deciding who the enemy is and by formally declaring war; and the soldier merely obeys the sovereign. The enemy, moreover, is legitimised within the state system and is accorded honour and respect. “Real” enmity, meanwhile, is embraced by the “irregular” fighter and is defined in relation to the “conventional” enmity embraced by the “regular” fighter (Schmitt 1963, 88). For Schmitt, “real” enmity is typified in the “partisan” – an oppressed political agent who is attached to a particular territory. For the partisan, enmity is not bound and regulated as in “conventional” enmity since the legal framework of the enemy is not recognised as legitimate. The final type of enmity—“absolute” enmity—is typified for Schmitt by the revolutionary (specifically the

⁵¹ For this interpretation of Schmitt's theory of enmity, I have drawn heavily on Slomp (2005).

Leninist) fighter: If the enemy is criminalised by the “partisan”, then for the revolutionary he is de-humanised and construed in an abstract sense and must be destroyed at all costs.

Although Schmitt develops this typology in relation to historical contexts in which each type is epitomised, it is important to note that these categories are not mutually exclusive and might be understood rather as ideal types. As such, these types of enmity might be usefully applied to a given case to determine the nature of enmity which is embraced. The contemporary British soldier, for instance, embraces aspects of all three Schmittian types: He embraces “conventional” enmity in the sense that the sovereign declaration of war is made by political leaders and ‘the distinction of friend and enemy is therefore no longer a political problem which the fighting soldier has to solve’ (Schmitt 1932, 34). In this sense, the soldier—who, according to Schmitt, would have no (political) agency and is merely following orders—does not hate the enemy but is apparently willing to kill and die for the sake of professionalism. As I theorised above, however, the soldier, in the process of *becoming* a soldier, also embraces an abstract (i.e., “absolute”, in Schmitt’s sense) notion of enmity; and in the course of actual war the British soldier regularly de-humanises the enemy and regards them as *illegitimate* (hence worthy of death).⁵² Finally, as I explore in Chapter 5, the British soldier is, to a significant extent, a Schmittian “partisan” in the sense that he is embedded in a particular territory and embodies (and thereby constitutes) the political agenda. Indeed, without the soldier’s existential act of turning declarations into deeds, there could be no war, since *material* war is constituted in the violent and reciprocal clash of wills. In this sense, the soldier expresses agency and is fundamentally political through his embodying and enacting what would otherwise be an empty declaration by the “sovereign”.⁵³

Despite the ambiguities inherent to all typologies such as Schmitt’s, such ideal type distinctions can help to clarify the range of possible Worldly ways of *Being-against*. Schmitt’s own typology is instructive also to the extent that it is grounded in historical precedent – where each type pertains to a particular epoch and to a particular material/technological context. By this logic, future war is bound to produce new types of enmity, or new amalgamations of existing types, as social and material conditions evolve. By understanding the underlying existential structure of enmity as *Being-against*, these new types may be better recognised as they emerge.

⁵² Schmitt does not present his typology as mutually exclusive; he remarks, for instance, that during the First World War “conventional” enmity transformed into “real” enmity (Schmitt 1963, 95). Indeed, the structure of the sentiment of enmity will invariably fluctuate during the course of hostilities.

⁵³ This typology would be confused even further if we were to consider the *citizen*(-soldier) to be sovereign in a Rousseauian sense.

iv. Fighting as the discursive manifestation of Being-against

So far in this subsection, I have been examining the constitutive nature of the dialectic of enmity as disclosed through an existentialist ontology of enmity. As such, I have theorised *Being-against* as the basic constitutive logic of the *Being* of war. From this phenomenological understanding of enmity, we can achieve a clearer understanding of the significance of fighting. Fighting, I contend, should not be understood as the ontological essence of war but rather as the *climactic manifestation of enmity (Being-against) in discourse*.

It will be useful to clarify this argument by contrasting it to that presented by Barkawi and Brighton (2011). Addressing the related issues of what war *is* and how we should study it, Barkawi and Brighton note that war studies scholars have either focused exclusively on the instrumentality of fighting itself or overlooked fighting altogether and studied only the effects of war on broader society. They then propose to unify these lines of inquiry by '[holding] on to the *ontological primacy of fighting*' but wresting it from instrumentality (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 136, my emphasis) – an approach which has the advantage of according with common sense understandings of war while also facilitating broader critique. While, therefore, fighting is theorised as the 'basic element of the ontology of war' (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 136), it is also understood as ontologically more than a kinetic exchange or a clash of arms to include the 'excess' which is invariably produced by fighting and which is historically generative (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 136). Thus, for Barkawi and Brighton 'fighting marks [...] the unmaking and remaking [...] of social and political life' (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 136).

Although the phenomenological theory I have proposed so far should be understood as supporting (and supported by) the primary claim advanced by Barkawi and Brighton (i.e., that war is generative), it is clear that from the perspective of *Being-against* fighting takes on a different ontological (and therefore methodological) significance. Barkawi and Brighton are surely right to point out that 'Fighting is that which thematically unifies war in general and in particular'; and I believe they are also right when they say that fighting 'marks the unmaking and remaking [...] of social and political life' (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 135; 136). From here, however, the methodological and metaphysical claims that "fighting" has an 'ontological primacy' and that it is the 'basic element of the ontology of war' (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 136) do not necessarily follow. Indeed, from a phenomenological perspective, fighting is merely how we identify concrete instances of war, but not how we understand its generative logics. As a notion, or an idea, fighting is indeed fundamental to war in the sense that it is the *telos* of *Being-against* – i.e., it is that towards which *Being-against* strives for self-realization and self-fulfilment. But fighting itself, I contend, is not the relevant variable for understanding the logics of war's generative potential. As I have argued above, rather, it is the underlying existential logics of *Being-against* which are generative/constitutive – logics which produce both fighting as well as the

broad social and political structures which emerge from fighting. Enmity is therefore the exogenous variable in Barkawi and Brighton's analysis; and I have been arguing that it, and not fighting per se, is the relevant variable for understanding the Worlds and Selves which war creates. This phenomenological ontology of war has a methodological advantage in that it becomes possible to narrowly conceptualise fighting as inherently destructive (which is normatively advantageous) while simultaneously preserving Barkawi and Brighton's central insight that war broadly understood is generative.⁵⁴

From the notion of *Being-against* we might deduce four broad logics through which "war" can be generative: (1) *Being-against* is generative as an *anticipatory state* – i.e., before *Being-against* reaches its *telos* in a given outbreak of war. This logic itself involves a couple of features: First, as we saw above, adversaries are themselves to some extent generated in a mutually constitutive dialectic; and second, once adversaries are constituted in a preliminary fashion, there will be an inevitable period of anticipation for battle – which is to say that all wars, to some extent, start "cold". During this time, cultural and material resources will be mobilised which will have generative effects well beyond the locus of hostile intentions. (2) *Being-against* will be constitutive of the outbreak of war itself. This includes both the fighting, which I have defined as the discursive manifestation of enmity, and the broader social and material structures which are mobilised towards the end of fighting. (3) After the clash of wills manifests in fighting, *Being-against* will be generative in the way it defines post-conflict "space": Once *Being-against* reaches its *telos* and once the clash of wills reveals a definitive victor or settlement, it will be certain existential commitments which have a disproportionate influence on the structures which are established in the wake of war; and as we have seen, it is not fighting itself, but rather the "will" and *Being-against* which *effects* both fighting itself and post-war generation. So far, logics (1), (2), and (3) correspond to the temporal phases of war, namely before, during, and after. *Being-against*, however, may be generative in another way (4): If it negates itself – if an adversary "breaks the sword", so to speak.⁵⁵ In this case, war cannot *Be* ontologically since the circle of necessary reciprocity which constitutes war will have been broken. That which is generated in such an act will of course depend on the specifics of the context. In Chapter 4, for example, I trace the existential trajectory

⁵⁴ To put it in Clausewitz's terms, fighting (or the application of physical force), is only the 'means of war'; while 'to impose our will on the enemy [and, by implication, on society more broadly] is its *object*' (Clausewitz 1832a, I.1.§2, 75). Clausewitz's 'will' (i.e., will to fight) in this case is tantamount to *Being-against* – it is the existential "energy" which constitutes war itself as fighting and which might be understood as the existential source of militarisation in society more broadly.

⁵⁵ For a discussion of "breaking the sword", see the Conclusion of Jesse Glenn Gray's (1959) *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle*.

of one British soldier who negates his own *Being-against* and becomes instead a *Being-alongside*, or a *Being-with*, his former enemy. At the level of a community, this phenomenon is evident through processes of reconciliation.

In conclusion: Starting from the Clausewitzian premise that enmity is the logical essence (the “universal element”) of war, I have argued—within the broader phenomenological framework established in the previous subsection—that *Being-against*, as the existential structure of enmity, constitutes the fundamental structure of war. *Being-against*, as a constitutive state of *Being* in general, constitutes Enemies, Warriors, and Warzones. Like all ontology, therefore, the ontology of war is essentially a social ontology. In the following two subsections (the rest of Section 3.3), I now seek to explore in more concrete terms how war emerges and is embodied as a discursive structure in the world. This involves first introducing the body into this phenomenological analysis (which has hitherto been lacking), and then theorising how war is embodied through aesthetically embracing its forms and expressing them in bodily gesture.

D. The primacy of perception and the war body

So far, I have grounded the ontology of war in Heidegger’s notion of *Being*; and more specifically, I have developed his notion of *Being-with* to show that the fundamental significance of war is *Being-against*. In short, War and the enmity it entails is one of Dasein’s possibilities. The broader aim of this theoretical analysis is to show how war is embodied; and how, subsequently, it is gestured in experience and action and how it thereby becomes historically continuous. This problem was raised in the previous chapter where I showed that, hitherto, war and the body are ambiguously related within the existing literature – a situation which I argued risks disavowing and hypostatizing war as an external fate. This phenomenology of war must therefore turn explicitly to the site of the body and theorise its ontological primacy.

Although Heidegger does not directly theorise embodiment, embodiment does follow logically from his notion of *Being-in-the-world*.⁵⁶ This is because, as we saw above, Dasein can only understand itself from within the world (there is no metaphysical view from nowhere, so to speak). And as Merleau-Ponty (1942, 1945) has shown, we do not find ourselves in the world in abstract and ideational terms,

⁵⁶ Heidegger did not so much overlook the theoretical importance of the body, but was rather preoccupied with a different level of analysis. In his *Being and Time*, for example, he refers (although only once, I believe) to ‘Dasein’s spatialization in its ‘bodily nature’ and recognises that this ‘bodily nature hides a whole problematic of its own’ – although he decides that *Being and Time* is not the place to treat this problematic directly (Heidegger 1927, 143 [108]).

but as *perceiving bodies*. Our bodies are the point of contact with both our Selves—as *Beings* concerned with our own *Being* (i.e., Dasein)—and the World, that context in which we can understand our Selves as *Being* and in which we enact our particular ways of *Being* (the body is also the means of encountering the Other, as is made explicit in fighting). The body, as such, can be understood as the material (corporeal) source from which the fundamental ontology of Dasein—that “Being-ontological” which has an understanding of Being—can emerge; and as such it is the source not only of all worldly entities, but also of all subjectivities (including Self and Other). In short, World, Self, and Other spring forth from the body. In this part, I therefore elucidate *Being* in its everyday manifestation as perception and embodiment by drawing on Merleau-Ponty’s (1945) phenomenology of perception. This will form a theoretical basis for understanding the role of the body in imagining, sensing, enacting, and, in short, constituting, war – themes which I discuss in the following subsection through the notion of the aesthetic encounter.

It will be useful, at the outset of this subsection, to take a step back and to ask what phenomenology is in the broadest terms, and then to follow the course of Merleau-Ponty’s argument towards the notions of perception and embodiment. Phenomenology famously seeks to return to phenomena – ‘back to the ‘things themselves’’, as Husserl famously put it (Husserl 1900, 1:168). As such, it undermines traditionally established categories which are seen ultimately to inhibit our understanding of ourselves and the world. Most notably, phenomenology undermines the Cartesian dualism of “subject” and “object” (and the related dualism of mind and body, and subject and world). This is evident in Heideggerian reasoning discussed above: Dasein does not so much reverse the Cartesian logic of *I think therefore I am*, but rather undermines any implied dualism altogether, since *Being* and *thinking* are indistinguishable in the phenomenon of *Being* as it is given to each of us in worldly perception (Heidegger 1927, 46 [24]). Furthermore, the dualistic categorisation of an *autonomous subject* and an *objective world* are not immediately given in phenomena themselves, but come after, upon reflection. Thus, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, the ‘entire effort’ of phenomenology is to rediscover our ‘naïve contact with the world’ (Merleau-Ponty 1945, lxx, Cf., 1942, 199). Going back to the foundation of phenomena establishes the possibility to understand the interconnectedness of Self, World, and Other—and how they are each contingent on the body—in a new light.

Our naïve contact with the world is, as Merleau-Ponty shows, necessarily grasped through embodied perception. Indeed, it is in virtue of the perceiving body that one is able to “have” a World and to “be” a Self and to stand in relation to an Other. To understand *Being-in-the-world*, therefore, Merleau-Ponty’s focus is not on Dasein, an abstract and existentialist entity, but on the “primacy of perception” and on the body as the foundation of that perception. In an insightful passage, Merleau-Ponty sums up the essence of this method:

By these words, the “primacy of perception,” we mean that the experience of perception is our presence at the moment when things, truths, values are constituted for us; that perception is a nascent *logos*; that it teaches us, outside of all dogmatism, the true conditions of objectivity itself; that it summons us to the tasks of knowledge and action (Merleau-Ponty 1946, 25)

Thus, *things*—the Self, the Object, the World, the Other—are given to us in perception. All ontic reality, in short, is given in, and is contingent on, the ability to perceive. From Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception, therefore, the relationship between Being and the embodiment of that Being can be clarified as a unity. Being, as a meaningful structure of the world, is contingent on its being perceived as such.

The *primacy of perception*, in turn, implies finitude and perspective – which are essential for understanding the nature of Self, World, and Other. Perception is always bounded by “horizons” – hazy margins which constitute the finitude of existence and which imply a particular perspective upon those margins. The World, as such, becomes the ‘field of our experience’ (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 428). In Chapter 5, for example, I explore how the British soldier’s World in Afghanistan is constituted by various horizons – by the constitutive perspective of the British soldier. These horizons, however, are not only visual (although the visual metaphor is very useful and I rely on Impressionist paintings to illustrate these boundaries of existence); they are also inherently temporal, as the soldier understands his World in time (in this case, for example, I explore how the British soldier invokes Romantic notions of the colonial British legacy in Afghanistan in the nineteenth-century to constitute his current world). Thus, the British soldier’s World—his War Scene, or what he simply describes as Afghan—is not an objective space but is delineated by horizons which are given in perception as the soldier moves through that world.⁵⁷

“Horizon” is also a useful metaphor to understand the finitude of the subject. *Being* is always manifest in and through a particular subjectivity – as a “character” in the drama of life; and this subjectivity is inherently finite, both in its own understanding of its Self and in the way it is perceived by the Other. In Chapter 4, I discuss the subjectivity of the British soldier. I explore how the soldier comes to understand his Self as a soldier. This requires, for example, appropriating the particular pieces of equipment which, within post-industrial warfare, make up the contemporary British soldier as such (i.e., rifle, body armour, etc.). I show, moreover, how the soldier-Self does not merely possess these objects but is “extended” across them and embedded in them. The condition for the possibility of this subjectivity and these existential entanglements with the objects of his World is the *Being* which

⁵⁷ As Merleau-Ponty notes, it is crucial to understand “space” in relation to our actual or hypothetical ability to move through that space: ‘We experience perception and its horizon “in action” [*pratiqement*] rather than by “posing” them or explicitly “knowing” them’ (Merleau-Ponty, *Prim of P*, 1964, 12).

projects itself upon them and upon its Self as a particular “subject” in that World. As we will see in Chapters 4 and 5, these horizons of subjectivity are also inherently temporal in that *Becoming* and *Unbecoming* the soldier is processual.

From this basis, we can understand the processes by which the body is implicated in the constitution of what Heidegger calls ‘*existential spatiality*’ (Heidegger 1927, 83 [56]) – how, that is, the body constitutes worldly structures. Space does not precede the subject (nor does the subject precede space); rather, space—which, along with time, is the substance of ontic reality—is “set up” as the plain upon which the human drama can unfold (Merleau-Ponty 1942, 168, 1945, 261). In Merleau-Ponty’s words, the ‘spatial level’ is established

when, between my body as the power of certain gestures and as the demand for certain privileged planes, and the perceived spectacle as the invitation to these very gestures and as the theatre of these very actions, a pact is established that gives me possession of space and gives to the things direct power upon my body (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 261)

A dramaturgical analogy is useful here – since the subject is more akin to a character and the world to a stage; and the mutually constitutive logic is entailed analogously by the fact that the character becomes the character when on the stage, and the stage a stage when it is the platform for the actor.

In conclusion: We may offer nuance to Heidegger’s statement that *only as phenomenology, is ontology possible* by saying that *only by way of the body is phenomenological ontology possible*. Ontic phenomena—Objects, Selves, Others, Worlds—are experienced in and through the body. It is true that the body is often absent in perception (Leder 1990), but this absence is itself a possibility which is opened up by the body – a body one of the possibilities of which is to take itself for granted. Merleau-Ponty’s contribution to the ontology of war, therefore, is to highlight the body as the condition for the possibility of that war and as the site where war manifests in being and time. The ontology of war, as such, is manifestly the study of the bodies which are capable of establishing war ontologically as a structure in space and time. Contra Scarry (1985) and those within critical war studies who depend on her ontological propositions (see Chapter 2), therefore, the body in war is not primarily a body in pain but a body which embodies the structures which bring about such pain; and it is *this* body which must be the heart of the ontology of war – the body which is capable of inflicting pain. Building on this basis, it is now necessary to examine the processes through which bodies embody war and carry it forth in time; it is necessary to examine how bodies constitute the continuity of war as tradition.

E. Aesthetically embodying war

In the first section of this chapter (3.2) I argued that, ontologically and conceptually, war should be understood as a *tradition* which is “handed down” and “taken up” between successive generations, and that this is the logic which establishes its continuity in time and space. I contrasted this argument to what I characterised as *analytic historicism*, the idea that war has a “nature” and a “character” – an idea which cannot account for historical continuity, but which instead understands each instance of war as “continuous” in relation to a timeless “nature”, thereby undermining historical continuity in favour of historical essentialism. In this final subsection, I seek to bring together the insights of the argument in the previous section (3.2) that war is tradition with the insights established so far in this section (3.3) that war is a structure of *Being*. Overall, my aim is to account theoretically for the human involvement in constituting war historically (hermeneutically) and phenomenologically. Thus, I seek to examine the historicity of the phenomenological processes that I have so far examined in this section, while simultaneously accounting for how the historicity of war itself is ultimately contingent on phenomenological possibilities of existence. This final subsection brings these themes together through Gadamer’s notion of the aesthetic encounter. The aesthetic encounter, which expresses Dasein’s fundamental capacity to *Be* in the world, can reveal the processes of how the tradition of war is embodied and gestured forth in space and time. The particular body which embodies this tradition might then be conceived as a *war body*.

A phenomenological theory of embodiment (or of *existential appropriation*) implies a distinction between actuality and possibility – between the *Being* of that which is appropriated and the *Being* of that which is not-yet-appropriated. How do entities come into existence, and what is the nature of those entities as mere possibilities? Although I draw heavily on Gadamer’s framework below, I want to begin with a critique of his general view on this problem. For Gadamer, *possibility* and *actuality* are encompassed in his term ‘hermeneutic universe’ – a quasi-metaphysical and evolving realm of meanings which establishes the continuity of history, and which encompasses all hermeneutic structures, past, present, and future. Gadamer offers an interesting example to illustrate this term:

It should be admitted that [...] an ancient image of the gods that was not displayed in a temple as a work of art in order to give aesthetic, reflective pleasure, and is now on show in a museum, retains, even as it stands before us today, the world of religious experience from which it came; the important consequence is that its world still belongs to ours. What embraces both is the hermeneutic universe (Gadamer 1960b, xxviii)

This example emphasises how momentary experience in history collapses the rigid and diachronic distinction between past, present, and future.⁵⁸ The problem with this notion of a ‘hermeneutic universe’, however, is that meaning becomes hypostatized as an extra-individual structure (Davey 2013, 47; see also Jauss 1970). Individual *Beings*, as such, are then understood as ‘effected and determined’ (Gadamer 1960b, xxx) and become mere nodes in a broader historical process (not dissimilar to poststructuralist philosophies). Thus, although (as I explore in the following paragraphs), Gadamer offers an insightful framework for understanding how tradition is necessarily *brought-into-Being* through aesthetic encounters, it is necessary to first distance the understanding of tradition I develop here from Gadamer’s – which I find to have unacceptable metaphysical implications (Gilks 2021b).

To account for how the possible becomes actualised in *Being*, and to avoid the risk of hypostatizing historical meaning/tradition, I want to propose a distinction between the heritage and tradition of war. The heritage of war is the cumulative *effect* that past wars have had on the material-cultural fabric of society: It encompasses all material and cultural structures which have been bequeathed (“handed down”) to any given generation – including, for example, military arsenals, political/legal/public constitutions of war, and artistic representations of war. The heritage of war determines to a large extent the way any particular war will manifest since it determines the kind of material-cultural resources which can be mobilised. The heritage of war, however, is not war itself, but only defines the possibilities of war. When the heritage of war is appropriated, embodied, and enacted, it becomes the tradition of war. Tradition is necessarily *lived* and *embraced*; it is always tradition for someone. Heritage, then, is dormant tradition; and tradition is heritage which has been mobilised and existentially appropriated – it is heritage which has been *brought forth* and set up as an explicit structure of *Being-in-the-world*. It should be emphasised, however, that *heritage* and *tradition* are not binary phenomena, but represent extremes along a continuum. Heritage is “re-awoken”, “re-experienced”, and “re-enacted” only processually and *to some extent*; and its existential appropriation is always subject to doubt and negation (as we will see in Chapter 4 through the example of one soldier’s embrace of war).

At a methodological level, this distinction between heritage and tradition has at least two important implications: First, by understanding the phenomenon of war as appropriated by the body, the possibility for human agency is opened up – a theme I will explore in more detail below. Second,

⁵⁸ Gadamer’s example draws on a phenomenological understanding of time as synchronic rather than diachronic. On this view, as Merleau-Ponty writes, consciousness is understood as moving ‘freely from a past and from a future that are not far from it (since it constitutes them as past or future, and since they are its immanent objects) to a present that is not close to it (since it is only present through the relations that it posits between itself, the past, and the future)’; ‘the past, then, is *not* past, nor is the future future [...] A past and a future spring forth when I reach out towards them’ (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 437; 444).

and more fundamentally, it directs theoretical and empirical attention to the site of the body and its field of perception. To understand the continuity of war in history, it becomes necessary to focus on the embodied practices of war – on how war is experienced and enacted. This experiencing and enactment of war includes not only the most dramatic instances of war itself, such as those of the soldier, but more fundamentally the everyday and mundane ways in which war is embodied. To understand how the heritage of war is embodied as tradition, I now turn to Gadamer's theory of the aesthetic encounter which insightfully reveals the underlying phenomenological processes.

As was theorised above through the work of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, we necessarily encounter our Selves and our Worlds in the course of perception – a theory which undermines the dualism of “subject” and “world”. Gadamer develops this line of inquiry through the case of the artwork by theorising how we aesthetically encounter its meaningfulness. Drawing on Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenology, he shows that the “artwork” is not something separate from the “subject” who experiences it. ‘When a work of art truly takes hold of us,’ he writes,

it is not an object that stands opposite us which we look at in hope of seeing through it to an intended conceptual meaning. Just the reverse. The work is [...] an *event* that “appropriates us” to itself. It jolts us, it knocks us over, and sets up a world of its own, into which we are drawn, as it were (Gadamer 1993, 71, original emphasis)

Thus, when the work of art “takes hold of us”, the meaning we experience cannot be separated from the experience of meaning (Gilks 2021b); and the subject which “has”—or rather *is*—that experience cannot be separated from the object which is experienced – they are a phenomenological unity. In phenomenological terms, there is simply an experience *of* the object and a body which encompasses both the object and the experiencing subject.

Gadamer's theory of aesthetic experience, however, is not meant to be limited to encountering the artwork; the artwork and the aesthetic encounter, rather, exemplify the nature of experience more broadly. In Gadamer's terms, aesthetic experience ‘is not just one kind of experience among others, but represents the essence of experience per se’ (Gadamer 1960b, 60). Thus, if, for Heidegger, we encounter ourselves in the world, and if, for Merleau-Ponty, we encounter ourselves through embodied perception, then for Gadamer we encounter ourselves through the work of art. Indeed, for Gadamer the encounter with the artwork essentialises the logic of subjective existence: ‘Since we meet the artwork in the world and encounter a world in the individual artwork, the work of art is not some alien universe into which we are magically transported for a time. Rather, we learn to understand ourselves in and through it’ (Gadamer 1960b, 83). Everything life subsequently entails—subjectivity, objectivity, ontology, discourse, history, etc.—emerges from the aesthetic experiences that constitute us in each fleeting “moment”; and the artwork exemplifies these hermeneutic logics.

Gadamer's theory of aesthetic experience can therefore be directly applied to the individual encountering the "war object" – as part of the heritage left behind by previous warring generations. Take, for example, the contemporary British soldier and his rifle: The "soldier" and the "rifle" do not pre-exist one another in the sense that there was never an autonomous and independent soldier (subject) who was issued an autonomously meaningful rifle (object). Rather, there was a recruit (a *soldier-in-becoming*) who encounters the material-militaristic legacy of late-industrialised warfare; and it is in the encounter that the soldier *qua* Soldier and the rifle *qua* Rifle are phenomenologically forged. Furthermore, to understand the unity of both as something which is constituted in the encounter, it is also necessary to examine the historicity of both "subject" and "object". The subject, in this case, would need to be understood as a "recruit" who had grown up in a militarised society in which the material object ("rifle") has a certain significance; and the significance of the object must be understood as embedded in a very particular and contingent technological legacy of warfare (it should be noted that the rifle *qua* Rifle *does* pre-exist the Soldier to the extent that *Others* regard it as a rifle; the Rifle, that is, is intersubjectively constituted).

To further theorise how the aesthetic encounter unfolds within experience, Gadamer offers the metaphor of a Platonic dialogue. In the aesthetic encounter, the subject asks questions of the historical object, and the answer received will always depend on a combination of the questions asked and on the kind of answer the object is able to give – thereby further undermining both objectivist and subjectivist understandings of aesthetic experience. The dialogue continues back and forth as the meaning of the object is "broken open" (Gadamer 1960b, 357). As in any dialogue, the meanings which emerge can be understood as a kind of 'fusion' which exceeds each of the interlocutors; in Gadamer's terms, there is a 'fusion of horizons' in the production of new ontological structures (Gadamer 1960b, 304; 367). This example of the dialogue emphasises the temporal essence of "continuity": The "event" of war, for example, does not occur as a dot in a timeless vacuum, but is rather constituted in the processes of unfolding dialogical meanings that each of its participants lived and enacted during its course.

So far in this subsection, I have only theorised in general terms how heritage comes "into play" in the world through the constitutive encounters that *Beings* have with their Worlds; but how can we understand the distinctive human capacity to embody tradition as such? What, in short, is the human contribution to the universe? Here, the phenomenological notion of *interpretation* is key to understanding how ontologies are brought into being and sustained. If ontology is that which is *understood to exist*, then interpretation is the process through which understanding is brought into being. As Heidegger puts it, in understanding 'lurks the possibility of interpretation—that is, of appropriating what is understood' (Heidegger 1927, 203 [160]). Developing and clarifying this logic through the case of hermeneutics, Gadamer theorises how we constitute and appropriate the meanings we derive from a text. The reader does not exist, Gadamer writes, 'who, when he has his text before

him, simply reads what is there. Rather, all reading involves application, so that a person reading a text is himself part of the meaning he apprehends' (Gadamer 1960b, 335). Thus, he continues, 'understanding is already interpretation because it creates the hermeneutical horizon within which the meaning of a text comes into force' (Gadamer 1960b, 396). Only through interpretation, therefore, is ontology possible; and it is the human agent who offers the world a certain interpretation – thereby constituting that very World.

Combining this notion of interpretation with the metaphor of a dialogue discussed above, we can see that the heritage of war in any given context does not speak for itself but must be beckoned forth from the realm of hermeneutic possibilities and asserted as a tradition. Take, for instance, the case of a Vietnam war novel: Although the novel itself sets up certain hermeneutic possibilities, it is the prerogative of the reader to interpret that text—its language, tone, the reach and implication of the metaphors, etc.—and to establish a position in relation to what the work is “saying”; and even in the event, for example, that the text is rejected from a pacifist sentiment, such a rejection is a direct response to what *that* text is “saying”. In reading such a text, therefore, one is constituting a particular experience of war from the resources of the past, as inscribed in the text. Another illustrative example is the case of the battlefield tourist who encounters war at the battlefield site. The war heritage at battlefield sites—albeit often highly curated—does not “speak” for itself, but must be appropriated by the visitor who, throughout the course of their visit, necessarily monumentalises the “event” in virtue of making sense of it. The battlefield tourist thereby comes to embody war as it is constituted between their experience and the heritage at the battlefield site (Gilks 2021a). These are just two explicit examples, but the heritage of war is also encountered implicitly in the course of everyday life, in architecture, politics, language, etc.⁵⁹ Indeed, since the heritage of war is so deeply engrained in material and cultural infrastructure, one cannot *Be* in the contemporary world without, to some extent, *Being-towards-war*.

It is important to note, finally, that interpretation should not be understood as an idle epistemic activity but rather as emerging from the potential of moving bodies. The world is interpreted in the course of moving through it, by acting in it: The soldier, for example, must pick up the rifle and carry it, and only then does it become a *Rifle-for-him*; and the tourist must navigate a battlefield site and appreciate its dimensions and scale, and only then does it become a battlefield; even the reader must act in response to what is read. Interpretation, as such, is not distinguishable from the bodily gestures we make in and through the world; and the ontological structure of the World, as such, should be understood as reflecting the gestures we make towards that World (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 192). If war

⁵⁹ The English language is full of metaphors which carry forth the heritage of war. In political and social policy discourse, for instance, there is a “war” on drugs, illness, a trade “war”, etc. In everyday speech, metaphors of war are also frequently used.

exists, therefore, it does so in and through our bodies which appropriate it, carrying it forth through interpretation and gesture. It is on the basis of this reasoning that I conceptualise a *war body* – a body which knows war and establishes its continuity in time. If there were no war bodies—no bodies which “retained” the experience of war (Toros et al. 2018)—there could be no war itself. The body is therefore the site where war resides ontologically; and war enters the body through the aesthetic experience of war’s heritage.

This subsection has thereby completed the theorisation of embodiment from the perspective of the individual *Being*. I began by establishing a distinction between heritage and tradition so that the act of appropriating war can be clarified. I then theorised the aesthetic encounter as the locus where significance is *brought-into-Being*. Finally, I considered the interpretative capacity of human *Being* to appropriate and thereby constitute war. In all of these notions, time has been fundamental: War has a deep continuity which is rooted in the smallest segment of time and in the most mundane act of interpretation (experiences which constitute appropriation). This suggests that the ontology of war must focus on the banality of everyday experience and practice.

3.4. Conclusion: Consequences for theory

The aim of this chapter has been to lay the groundwork for a phenomenology of war. As mentioned in the Introduction, this phenomenology of war has made explicit commitments to certain theorists and ideas. Specifically, it has been rooted in Heidegger’s existentialist and hermeneutic critique of Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology and its legacy in the work of Merleau-Ponty and Gadamer. I began, in Section 3.2, by submitting war to a hermeneutic reduction. This was done by critiquing the analytic tendency to examine the relationship between war in particular and “war in general”; and I argued that this framing—which I termed *analytic historicism*—is misleading and sets up false problems – i.e., problems which arise not from war itself but from the analytic categorisation. In opposition to this view, I argued that war, as a social institution embedded in time, should be understood as a tradition; and that continuity is established not in virtue of each instance of war partaking in a timeless essence but because wars are strung together in the fabric of time as the tradition is “handed down” and “taken up” between generations. Section 3.3. then submitted war to a phenomenological-existentialist reduction. Here, I showed that war, as the existential state of *Being-against*, is an essential human possibility. I then theorised the war body as the fundamental entity which embraces and perpetuates the tradition of war in time. In Part Two of this thesis, I explore these logics empirically by focusing on the soldier as an archetypal case of a subject which embodies the tradition of war. In the rest of this concluding section, I briefly summarise two theoretical consequences of this phenomenology of war.

A. The ontology of the theory of war

If, as I have been arguing, the *Being-of-war* is tantamount to the tradition of war at any given moment in history, then any given theory of war (including this one) does not exist outside of that tradition but is essentially a part of it. Thus, there can never be a universal theory of war; there can only be theories of war which occur at particular moments in history and have a *certain* historical perspective upon that which they theorise. In light of this observation, my contention above that the fundamental structure of war is *Being-against* should not be understood as claiming that *Being-against* is a timeless “nature” of war if by “nature” it is implied that all instances of war abide by some transcendent law which establishes what any particular war *is*. This argument, rather, should be understood as an observation *about* war from *within* war. In this sense, what I have offered is an immanent critique of war: It does not make any claim to universality or objectivity but rather seeks to describe and explain the existential-hermeneutic logics of war as they disclose themselves to the theorist who is himself a part of that which is being theorised. Indeed, it is precisely in virtue of the historical perspective on which this theory is based that I have been able to have an idea of what war *is* at all.

From this notion of an immanent critique of war, we can return to the issue of normativity and the meaning of war that I discussed in the previous chapter. There, I argued that although many critical war studies scholars have disclosed important insights about the centrality of the human body in war, their methodological frameworks are fundamentally limited by a priori normative commitments about the nature of war. In particular, there is a trend within critical war scholarship to regard war itself as antithetical to meaning. I have argued in this chapter that this view misunderstands the ontological substance of war: Like all socio-historical structures, war is inherently meaningful in virtue of its existence. The moral problem with war, therefore, is not that war is meaningless but that the meanings it entails are injurious and ruinous of human life. For some people, war does of course make meaning—indeed *Being*—an impossibility, destroying not only their World in which their existence is rooted but more fundamentally their bodily condition in which their contact with existence itself is made possible. Thus, for some, war may indeed impose a “politics of injury” – if that term is to be methodologically and ethically useful. This, however, is not war itself, but only its effects; and war itself must be understood if its effects are to be avoided. The real critical task, then, is to examine *why* and *how* war becomes a meaningful structure of existence. The first step—after acknowledging that one is oneself a part of the structure of war—is to try to disclose its logics from within, recognising and even respecting its inherence and appeal as a way of life – such would be to *understand* war. The second step would then be to undermine these existential logics, to intervene in the processes through which *Being-against* is validated and “handed down” as a possible form of life. My aim in the empirical chapters that follow is primarily to take this first step – to disclose the structures which existentially constitute the British soldier; and although my aim is not *explicitly* critical in the sense that I do not primarily seek to

undermine these structures, I believe that disclosing them is in some sense to undermine them since their contingent absurdity then becomes apparent and the soldier's World is thereby demystified and disenchanting.

B. The ontology of agency in war

A phenomenology of war opens theoretical space for a more nuanced understanding of human agency and responsibility. To highlight this contribution, let me begin by outlining how other approaches conceive of agency. Both rationalist/positivist and critical theorists have tended to disavow the notion of freedom. The rationalist, as Merleau-Ponty observes, is forced to decide whether 'the free act is possible or not', and whether 'the event originates in me or is imposed from the outside' (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 467). Influenced by natural science, most theorists choose the latter and understand the "cause" as originating outside of the body. The critical theorist, influenced overwhelmingly by poststructuralism, usually accepts this basic binary and concludes, along with the rationalist—although for different reasons—that freedom is either negligible or fundamentally impossible. Indeed, this is part of the problem of why war is disavowed, disembodied, and objectified as an exogenous force – for we rational Beings could not *willingly* constitute war.

From a phenomenological perspective, a different notion of freedom emerges. Humans, as we have seen, are not independent from the world within which, and the people among which, they do or do not have freedom. Rather, as we saw above, Self, World, and Other are reciprocally constituted through time. Freedom is therefore grounded not in a wilful moment or in a divine cause, but in the temporal processes of how we relate to the Other, to the World, and—most fundamentally—to our Selves. To the extent that freedom exists, it emerges from the processes of *Becoming* in time. The paradox in this kind of freedom, as Merleau-Ponty observes, is that 'We choose our world and the world chooses us' (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 481); and to add to this: That we choose the Other, and the Other chooses us. To be free, therefore, is to take up a project in the world and to establish a background against which decisions can be made; it is to choose a character and a way of *Being-in-the-world* (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 460–63).

One of my underlying arguments in this thesis is that war exists (i.e., is continuous in history) because people *choose* to make a project of it – to embody it and carry it forth as a way of *Being*. In Part Two of this thesis, I focus on the most extreme case of this by examining how the soldier makes a project of war and does so in a way that must be understood as essentially free. I present the soldier, therefore, as an archetypal war body. As I have argued above, however, war is constituted as tradition (embodied) in the most mundane ways and through the most every-day practises as subjects encounter

the heritage of war. From a phenomenological perspective, these mundane practises should be understood as entailing freedom as subjects choose how to respond to the heritage of war.

By virtue of being in a finite world, freedom is of course essentially limited – indeed, absolute freedom is entirely inconceivable and is a red herring for the study of agency. As we saw above, we are bequeathed a finite heritage of war; and we must choose how to interpret that heritage, whether that involves embracing it wholeheartedly or attempting to reject it entirely by positioning oneself existentially in opposition to it. In either of these cases—between which there is a whole continuum—the choices are limited in the sense that they are a *response* to a set of contingent historical conditions. As Merleau-Ponty says, ‘freedom only modifies history by taking up what history *offered*’ (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 476, original emphasis). The methodological focus should therefore be on the processes through which that which is “offered” is “taken up” and embodied; it should highlight the contribution that each individual makes to the continuity of war as a structure of life.

Part Two: The British Soldier in Afghanistan

Methodological introduction

Part One of this thesis has developed the theoretical basis for a phenomenology of war. Chapter 2 sought to situate the contribution of this thesis within the emerging field of critical war studies. Specifically, I showed that the significance of war remains estranged from the human body. Chapter 3 then developed the phenomenological framework to ground the ontology of war in human *being*; and I argued that war should be understood as a tradition which is “taken up” and carried forth by successive generations as they respond to the heritage of war which is “passed down”. In this second Part of the thesis, my main aim is to empirically exemplify some of the phenomenological logics that I have so far only outlined philosophically. Focusing on the case of the contemporary British soldier in Afghanistan, I explore, over the course of three chapters, some of the processes through which war is constitutively embodied. As I explain below, these chapters are not meant to be comprehensive – neither as an exemplification of the phenomenological method, nor as a phenomenological examination of the case at hand; they are meant, rather, as an exploration of the kinds of methods which can be employed to explore the phenomenological logics discussed above.

Before commencing this case study, this introductory section seeks to clarify several methodological issues and is divided into two subsections. First, I outline the scope and purpose of the phenomenological case study. This includes building on my justification for focusing on the British soldier to exemplify the phenomenological logics theorised above, as well as outlining the *phenomenological* object of study. Second, I explain how sources and methods were selected and the kind of validity they aspire to.

A. The phenomenological case study

In the Introduction to this thesis, I explained how I phenomenologically “delineate” the *contemporary British soldier*. I also offered two justifications for this choice of case study: First, the British soldier—as an extreme case of a social actor who embodies the tradition of war—exemplifies many of the phenomenological logics discussed above; and second, I as author have an (auto)ethnographic relationship to the case material. Having since developed the theoretical framework, I want to now reflect more on the purpose and potential of the case study in this kind of sociological-phenomenological research. What, precisely, is the object of study; and how can it be “accessed” and articulated?

The object of study, in the broadest sense, is the constitutive processes through which the *being-of-war* is generated. As we saw above, the *being-of-war*, as a tradition, is fundamentally contingent on humans embodying it and carrying it forth in time – whether by the soldier, the museum goer, the scholar, or the passive observer of war heritage who does not consider themselves a retainer of war experience. As such, the object of study is *the aesthetic encounter with the heritage of war (and the related transfiguration of that heritage into tradition)*. Since, moreover, the aesthetic encounter is—from a subjective point of view—an “experience” that the given subject “has” of the World, and since this “experience” is the basic process through which war is embodied, then it becomes necessary to discuss how war is “experienced” by the soldier and how I, as researcher, might “access” this “experience”. It is first necessary, however, to situate the notion of “experience” within the hermeneutic-phenomenological perspective of this thesis.

To explain what I mean by “experience” and to justify its validity as an object of study, it will be useful to contrast it to the notion of “lived experience”. As Max Weber argued, “lived experience” is, in a strict sense, radically ineffable and inaccessible and therefore cannot form the basis of a social science. Even our own stream of consciousness is inaccessible to ourselves once it is passed – let alone the experience of others. Weber is concise on this issue when discussing the prospect of grounding sociological analysis in the notion of “experience”; ‘As soon as it becomes an object of *thought*,’ Weber writes,

not even a first-person experience can be “reflected” or “reproduced” in inner experience. That would not constitute thought *about* the experience, but rather another “experience” of the earlier experience. Or rather, since this is impossible, a *new* “experience,” “accompanied” by the “feeling” [...] that one has already “experienced” “this” (“this” being a part of that which is immediately given to “experience” and which remains indeterminate) before (Weber 1903, 169)

Thus, even when “re-membling” our own past experiences, we do not “re-experience” that which is past but rather have *new* experiences which are somehow connected to those which are past. “Lived experience” is therefore inherently irretrievable. But what, then, is the object of study in interpretative sociological research? For Weber, the interpretation of experience requires that we methodologically convert raw experience into propositions about experience: That we abstract and theorise “motives” as ideal types which can be “adequate” to explain the conduct in question (Weber 1920, 11). Such is an *analytic* solution to the problem of other minds, where “understanding” is reduced to causal explanation.

From a hermeneutic-phenomenological perspective, however, this Weberian critique of the validity of “experience” as an object of study is grounded on an overly simplistic notion of “experience”. From a phenomenological perspective, all “lived experience” presupposes interpretation; and there is no such thing as pure, direct, experience. As Merleau-Ponty (1945) shows, visual perception is always *constitutive* (and the Kantian distinction between the seeing and the seen rests on problematic assumptions). Furthermore, from a hermeneutic perspective, “lived experience” always occurs within an historical and social context; and any given stream of experience is always infused with culture (Gadamer 1960b). *Interpretation*, therefore, is not primarily a social-scientific method but a condition for the possibility of human existence; and the fact that we can use “interpretation” as a social-scientific method only demonstrates the essential necessity of interpretation to all understanding (Heidegger 1927, 203 [160]). From this perspective, “re-membling” and “re-experiencing” are rather different activities to those which Weber had in mind. We do not bridge past and present with a scientific proposition which somehow conjures up some essence of that which is past; we *contact*, rather, with the hermeneutic structure within which past and present subsist as conceivable entities. To advance William James’ (1890, I:239) analogy, if our own “lived experience” is a stream of thought, then into this very personal stream flow the tributaries of history; and it is in virtue of being *essentially connected* with these other streams that understanding the Other and the World is a possibility in the first place. Thus, social existence is always downstream of that which has come before; and it is seemingly a human imperative to let the streams of history flow through unto the next generations.

When we speak of “accessing” experience, therefore, it is not about somehow penetrating into the consciousness of an Other through some absolute act of empathy – whether that Other is stood before us as a fleshy interlocutor or existing only in the mythic past and mediated by a work of art. “Accessing” an Other’s “experience”, rather, is about existentially approximating the aesthetic and linguistic conditions which are constitutive of their *Being*; it is about “entering” the same *existential space*. To do this, the researcher needs to theoretically and interpretatively discover how they (the subject in question) discovered their Self and then *become* a part of those same constitutive structures (which does not necessarily require honouring them). This includes existentially approximating the

context within which the Other is embedded, understanding the heritage which they have embodied and converted into tradition, and examining the web of constitutive relationships they have with objects and other subjects. So how can this hermeneutic phenomenology of the Other be converted into social scientific research; and what methods and sources are appropriate to “access” the Other’s embodied “experience”? I begin to answer these questions by outlining the methods and sources I have found appropriate in the following chapters.

B. Methods and sources

Part Two is divided into three chapters, each of which employs a different method and a unique set of sources which I have found adequate for the specific phenomenological questions raised in that chapter. Seeking to account for how the soldier is constituted in relation to the objects and other subjects he encounters in the course of *Becoming* the soldier, Chapter 4 offers a phenomenological interpretation of former British soldier, Harry Parker’s (2016) debut “novel” *Anatomy of a Soldier*. In Heideggerian terms, I show that *Being* is always *Being-amid-objects-and-subjects* and that subjectivity is never an autonomous “I” but is always existentially entangled with the material and social world. Chapter 5 then examines the broader existential milieu—i.e., the World—in relation to which the British soldier is constituted. Here, I focus on impressionist paintings by “official” British war artists and explore their ability to capture the aesthetic forms which hermeneutically constitute the Afghan War Scene. Together, Chapters 4 and 5 thereby attempt to articulate the British soldier’s *Being-in-the-world*. Chapter 6 then seeks to explain the existential significance of this lifeworld by considering how the British soldier regards the prospect of death. In particular, I draw on Heidegger’s notion of *Being-towards-death* to theorise the *anxiety of death* as something from which the soldier “flees” into the World and which thereby *explains* the World’s existential presence. To explore this empirically, I examine officially published obituaries as well as interviewing veterans about their experiences of anticipating and witnessing death. These three chapters therefore bring together a range of methods and sources. The object of study which unifies these diverse discussions is the *Being* of the British soldier and the associated processes through which the soldier constitutively embodies war. As such, the object of study is not the “lived experience” (in a Weberian sense) of this or that soldier, but rather the hermeneutic structure which determines what kinds of experiences are available for the British soldier within this given context. The variety of methods and sources might therefore be understood as an attempt to “triangulate” the hermeneutic structure of the British soldier’s experience.

Since this thesis is an exercise in developing a new theoretical framework for studying war, the selection of methods and sources has been largely *ad hoc* and experimental – an exercise of following sources where they lead. Before offering a methodological justification of the decisions made, it is

worth briefly recounting the processes that I—as a particularly situated author—have gone through in selecting methods and sources for conducting this phenomenology of war. Chapter 4 is the result of an attempt to conduct a broader analysis of memoirs by British soldiers (of which there have been a few dozen published in the period I am considering). I reached the conclusion, however, that war memoirs could not yield the kinds of (phenomenological) insights that I was looking for. Tending towards anecdotally describing “lived experiences”, I found that these memoirs did not generally articulate the underlying hermeneutic structure and aesthetic forms which gave rise to those experiences.⁶⁰ I then serendipitously stumbled upon Harry Parker’s (2016) *Anatomy of a Soldier*, a text which—despite being closely autobiographical—is marketed as a novel and which therefore falls outside the conventional scope of memoir analysis. As I seek to make clear in Chapter 4, however, Parker’s “novel” uncannily exemplifies many of the themes I sought to explore theoretically in this chapter (in particular, how the soldier is constituted as a Subject in relation to the Objects and other Subjects of war). I therefore focus on a close reading and interpretation of this text from a phenomenological perspective. A similar methodological/authorial experience occurred with Chapter 5. Seeking to describe the British soldier’s World, I had initially intended to depict this World using prosaic imagery from memoirs. I found, however, that the World was largely absent from the egotistical discourse which dominates contemporary war memoirs (although I do still explore some prosaic imagery where suitable). I then discovered the phenomenon of contemporary “official war art” and was personally convinced of the validity of this source to depict the Anglo-Afghan war scene. The topic of Chapter 6 (the significance of the prospect of death for the soldier) was then motivated by the recognition that any study of the experiences and embodiment of war must account for the significance of death, especially when the focus is on the soldier. The theme of death was also something that emerged from the interviews I have conducted with soldiers/veterans. Realising that death was an important theme which had to be included in any phenomenology of war, I sought other sources to capture the significance of death for the soldier. This led to a discourse analysis of official British government obituaries, where senior officers, comrades, and family are invited to comment regarding the deceased.

The range of methods and sources therefore reflects the exploratory and theory-building nature of this research. As is clear from the above account of methodological decisions, each source was initially chosen because *I*, as an (auto)ethnographically involved author (see Introduction), was convinced that the given source promised the potential to disclose the hermeneutic-phenomenological

⁶⁰ The literature on war memoirs has flourished in the last decade. See, for example, Kleinreesink (2016), Bourke (2016), Dwyer (2016), Dyvik (2016), Chouliaraki (2016), and Woodward and Jenkins (2012, 2013, 2016b, 2018). Unlike war memoirs from earlier periods, the contemporary Western war memoir offers very few insights into the aesthetic forms which constitute the scene within which the war unfolds. For an historical overview of how war memoirs have evolved, see Harari (2008, 2007, 2004).

structure of the British soldier's way of *Being-against*. Thus, the initial source of the arguments presented below is my intuition that, for instance, Parker's *Anatomy of a Soldier* is an insightful account of being a soldier, that the "official" paintings I consider in Chapter 5 effectively convey the aesthetic frames which are generally constitutive of the soldier's World, or that the obituaries and interview testimonies in Chapter 6 are "honest" of how death is anticipated, etc. "Intuitions", however, are epistemologically inadequate, both in a social-scientific sense as well as for self-understanding: Intuitions are inadequate for social science because, as Weber (1903, 264, note 71) rightly explains, they are scientifically useless unless they can be communicated to the reader. Moreover, intuitions are even inadequate for self-understanding because one can never be sure of their source and thus the "veracity" of their content. In the case of this research, for instance, I could not be sure that my "autoethnographic intuitions" were based on my "authentic" and "naïve" experience as a soldier or whether they were contrived or confabulated through theoretical inquiry in the years hence.

So how can intuitions be justified and communicated in a manner that is scientifically valid? First, they must be articulated: When I intuited the "truthfulness" and accuracy of a given painting in Chapter 5, for example, the onus was then on me as author to articulate that intuition in a way that made it comprehensible to a hypothetical reader with limited knowledge of what it means to be a British soldier. But what, in turn, is the criterion for a valid articulation? Drawing on Weber's notion of "adequacy", I want to suggest that a valid articulation of an intuition is one in which the explanation that emerges is *adequate* to make sense of the object in question.⁶¹ In this case, I am trying to explain the lifeworld of the British soldier; and if, in practice, my interpretation seems plausible to the imagination of the reader, then I might have said something true about that lifeworld. Like all social science, this argument therefore hinges on my ability to convince both myself and reader alike of the validity of the interpretation offered. It can then be asked whether the behaviour of the British soldier *makes sense* in light of the World and Self I articulate in the following chapters. Ultimately, then, the validity of what follows will depend on the reader's judgement.

⁶¹ Weber speaks of causal explanation of human behaviour as grounded in the "adequacy" of the causal statement to make sense of the behaviour in question: Thus, 'A motive is a complex of subjective meaning which seems to the actor himself or to the observer an adequate ground for the conduct in question' (Weber 1920, 11). Concepts must therefore be constructed such that they are 'adequate on the level of meaning' (Weber 1920, 20, see also 1906, 187, 1903, 127). In contrast to Weber (who grounds "adequacy" in rationalist explanations of ideal types), however, I seek to ground "adequacy" in shared hermeneutic structures.

C. Conclusion

In this introductory section to Part Two, I have sought to outline various methodological issues associated with the phenomenological case study. I first recapitulated the scope and purpose of the case study. I emphasised that the overall methodological aim is not to “access” the experience of this or that soldier, but rather to interpret the general aesthetic forms which are available for the soldier to experience and which eventually constitute each individual soldier’s *Being*. I then discussed how I selected sources and methods, and I explained how I combine autoethnographic convictions with a more conventional methodological justification. Ultimately, the validity of what follows cannot be deductively demonstrated, but is rather contingent on my ability to make sense of how the British soldier constitutively embodies war. My hope is that this phenomenological method can yield a new understanding of the British soldier specifically, and the embodiment of war generally.

4. Subjectivity: Anatomy of a Soldier

4.1 Introduction

I have argued above that War is a phenomenon the existence of which is contingent on its being embodied in and through time; and as a phenomenon, I theorised War as *Being-against* (as a particular way of *Being-in-the-world*). I also suggested that the social actor who epitomises this embodiment—especially in contemporary Western society—is the soldier. Although we all embody War to some degree in virtue of “civilised” existence, it is the contemporary professional soldier who makes a vocation of War, and who thereby contributes most to its manifestation as a material reality. The *soldier*, as such, offers a prime case for understanding how War is ontologically constituted in the sense that understanding how the soldier *comes-into-being* will facilitate an understanding of how War itself *comes-into-being*. In this first empirical chapter, therefore, I consider what the soldier *is*, ontologically; I consider the processes through which a “civilian” *becomes* a “soldier, what it means (existentially) to *be* a soldier, and how the soldier ceases to *be*.

I focus this empirical investigation on one particular soldier, and it is from this example that I attempt to outline the broader ontological features of what the soldier *is*.⁶² The soldier I consider is Tom Barnes, the fictional protagonist of Harry Parker’s (2016) autobiographical “novel”, *Anatomy of a Soldier*. Like his author, Barnes steps on a mine whilst on a patrol in enemy territory, losing both legs among other injuries. The “novel” is about his coming to terms with his ‘incomplete’ (Parker 2016, 1) embodied existence as a wounded veteran.⁶³ I focus on this text because, as we will see, its literary structure is apposite for this phenomenology of the soldier’s subjectivity. It is appropriate for three interrelated reasons: Firstly, *Anatomy of a Soldier* is narrated from the perspective of 45 inanimate objects, each of which slots together to form a mosaic of Barnes’ shattered existence. By decentring the egocentric “I” which tends to be blind to the material and social conditions of its existence, this object narrative literary method discloses the existential structure within which the protagonist/author’s life is suspended.⁶⁴ Secondly, the trauma around which the war story revolves discloses the precariousness of

⁶² Just like there is no such thing as “war” in general, but only particular historical wars from which the notion “war” must be generalised, there is no such thing as “soldier” in general. The general, as such, must be achieved through the particular; and it is for this reason that I focus on one particular soldier.

⁶³ All references to this text hereafter will be as page numbers only.

⁶⁴ Seemingly without knowing, Parker has reinvented an old literary method which was once popular in eighteenth-century England; see, for example, Flint (1998) and Blackwell (2004). Parker’s novel, however,

the soldier's existence *qua* Soldier. With an "incomplete" body, Barnes can no longer identify with the ideal of the proud soldier he once aspired towards since this soldier prided himself on certain bodily abilities; and Barnes' bodily trauma is therefore tantamount to existential trauma (Scotland-Stewart 2021; Gilks 2022). As such, Barnes' tragic story juxtaposes in sharp contrast the state of the fervent soldier with that of the disillusioned veteran who has renounced his *Being-against*. Finally, and as already suggested, this "novel" only really makes sense when understood not primarily as fictional but as (phenomenologically) autobiographical (Gilks 2021c; Cf. Bernard 2017). Interpreting the significance of his own life through fictitious objects which narrate a sequence of fictitious events about fictitious subjects, Parker, I argue, is exercising his transcendental imagination to make sense of a life such as *his*; and my aim will be to show how this transcendental imagination facilitates unique phenomenological insights into the soldier's subjectivity.

This ontology of the soldier presupposes an ontology of subjectivity more generally, and so before examining *Anatomy of a Soldier* in Section 4.3, I begin this chapter (Section 4.2) with a theoretical exploration of the phenomenon of subjectivity. Drawing on Heideggerian phenomenology, I offer two propositions about the nature of subjectivity: First, I propose that the Subject be understood as spatially, socially, and temporally "extended". Although consciousness is seemingly *here* and *now*, it is also, as we will see both theoretically and empirically, embedded in and contingent on those things *over there*, *past*, and *future*. I will show that the existence of subjectivity is contingent on this "extendedness", and that understanding this "extendedness" is therefore essential to understanding subjectivity. Second, and relatedly, I propose that subjectivity emerges dialectically with the significance it itself constitutes. There is, in effect, a mutually constitutive circularity between Self and World – a Self and World which themselves emerge in the circularity. This theoretical section, as such, will establish the main phenomenological notions used to analyse Barnes/Parker's subjectivity as a soldier in the following section.

The main argument of this chapter—which fits into the broader argument of this thesis—is that the fundamental significance of *Anatomy of a Soldier* is enmity (or what I have theorised as *Being-against*). Although the narrating objects seem primarily to depict a material world, this material reality is only significant within the broader context of a war story – a war story which is itself underpinned by enmity. The enemy, it is true, is largely latent in the text, with the focus substantively on Barnes' injury; but this latency is itself significant since Barnes' injuries also only make sense within a broader

differs in important ways from this earlier genre in that it is not primarily in response to a sense of alienation precipitated by industrial and materialist society (on this point, see Gilks (2021c)).

context of losing bodily abilities *as* a soldier. All this to say that *Anatomy of a Soldier* is essentially a war story; and that as a war story its essential structure is *Being-against*.

4.2 The phenomenon of subjectivity

A. Introduction

Subjectivity is an ambiguous term, and my phenomenological analysis throughout this chapter plays on this ambiguity. In particular, it implies two distinct things: Firstly, and most colloquially, it is synonymous with *consciousness*; and secondly, and more etymologically, it implies *the state of being a subject* (hereafter, Subject).⁶⁵ In the first sense, subjectivity is necessarily confined to the first-person experiential present (I am conscious *here, now*, and of *this*); while in the second sense, it includes a broader temporal structure of experience, including from the first, second, and third person perspectives – it is, as we will see, something *objective* which other subjects can discern. Throughout this chapter, I progress towards the conclusion that these senses are hermeneutically interrelated: That although consciousness is of course the condition for the possibility of a Subject, that the Subject, in turn, is the condition for the possibility of consciousness. Indeed, I argue that without the broader ontological structure of a Subject—either in the first-person form of a Self, or the second/third person form of an Other—momentary experience would be meaningless.⁶⁶ My theoretical aim, therefore, is to explore how *subjectivity-as-consciousness* and *subjectivity-as-state-of-being-a-subject* are essentially (dialectically) bound together in the phenomenon of Subjectivity.

Drawing primarily on Heideggerian phenomenology, I make this argument—as noted above—by way of two ontological propositions about what subjectivity *is*: That it is materially, socially, and temporally “extended”; and that it emerges from the structures of meaning (significance) that it itself constitutes. Subjectivity, as such, is dialogically entangled with its material, social, and temporal

⁶⁵ By “subject”—as that which is the root noun of “subjectivity”—I mean *conscious subject*, i.e., *a being that thinks, feels, and perceives*. I then understand by “subjective” (with the suffix *ive*) the first-person *thinking, feeling, and perceiving*. Finally, by “subjectivity” (with the second suffix *ity*) I mean the *state of being a conscious subject*, i.e., *the state of being a being which thinks, feels, and perceives*. These definitions, which are consistent with the Oxford English Dictionary, can then be understood in relation to the Heideggerian notion of *Dasein*, i.e., *a being for whom its own being is an issue*.

⁶⁶ I define “Self” as the first-person experience of *being-a-subject*; while “Other” refers to the second- or third-person experience of a Subject; phenomenologically, therefore, there are two types of Subject in the World: Self and Other.

context (with what I will call its *existential milieu*). The basic methodological implication of this phenomenological understanding of subjectivity is that to understand subjectivity in either of its two senses it is necessary to understand how it is spatially, socially, and temporally structured – a task I pursue empirically in section (4.3). Before proceeding with these two propositions, it will be useful to begin by outlining a more dominant understanding of subjectivity in relation to which the phenomenon of subjectivity theorised here can be more clearly stated.

B. Descartes and the duplicitous, extra-worldly subject

In order to argue that subjectivity is a worldly entity and to explore that worldliness empirically, it is first necessary to reject a dualistic ontology of subjectivity which theorises one aspect of subjectivity—indeed, its most essential aspect—as existing beyond the world. Let me begin with a caricature of a dualistic understanding of subjectivity: According to Christian theology, the “subject” is a relatively autonomous being the nature of which is determined, at least in significant part, by some “inner”, extra-worldly principle.⁶⁷ This dualistic ontology has important implications for moral reasoning: Although we are influenced by worldly forces—by others, and by material and cultural phenomena—each of us possesses an inner force—a “soul”, manifest through “will”—which can in principle overcome these influences, and which can ultimately overcome the world. There is, as such, a duplicity of being – one which is worldly, and one which is extra-worldly. The methodological aporia is then to explain how “will” and “soul” enter the world, and to what extent the world is contingent on them (the phenomenological notion of subjectivity, as we will see, overcomes this problem).

In Western philosophy, the most influential articulation of this dualistic notion of being was by Descartes – hence, it was primarily Descartes who the phenomenologists sought to refute. Grounded in historically contingent theological ambitions of proving the existence of God, Descartes reasons that there is a clear ontological distinction between mind (or “soul”) and body. Since his reasoning is clear and succinct, it is worth citing him at length (with my emphasis added):

Next I examined attentively what I was. I saw that while I could pretend that I had no body and that there was no world and no place for me to be in, I could not for all that pretend that I did not exist. I saw on the contrary that from the mere fact that I thought of doubting the truth of other things, it followed quite evidently and certainly that I existed; whereas if I had merely

⁶⁷ I choose Christian theology as an example for two reasons: Firstly, because it is the dominant heritage of Anglo academic discourses, hence we can expect that it has influenced secular scientific discourse; and secondly, because it is surely one of the most eloquent and sophisticated articulations of a dualistic subjectivity.

ceased thinking, even if everything else I had ever imaged had been true, I should have had no reason to believe that I existed. *From this I knew I was a substance whose whole essence or nature is simply to think, and which does not require any place, or depend on any material thing, in order to exist.* Accordingly this ‘I’ – that is, the soul by which I am what I am – is entirely distinct from the body, and indeed is easier to know than the body, and would not fail to be whatever it is, even if the body did not exist (Descartes 1637, 127[32-33])

Thus, Descartes’ “subject” is ontologically duplicitous in the sense that its worldly manifestation is (potentially) misleading about what it really is (here, I am exploiting the double meaning of the term “duplicitous”). Beneath this embodied manifestation of *me* there is something more essential, a truer *Me* which somehow relates to *me-as-a-worldly-and-embodied-manifestation*.

As has long been established, Descartes’ reasoning here is at best inconclusive and at worst fallacious. Firstly, on its own terms, the argument is inconclusive: Descartes reasons from the fact that he can doubt the existence of matter to the conclusion that he is ontologically distinct from matter. There is nothing in Descartes’ argument, however, to avoid the (now more intuitive) conclusion that his mind is grounded in matter. As I explore below through the case of *Anatomy of a Soldier*, subjectivity—and by implication, I argue, “mind” and “soul”—is not only grounded in the matter of the body but exists in virtue of its relationship to the material world – a world on which it is essentially and tragically contingent. A second and more fundamental weakness of the argument is the absurdity of the premise on which the reasoning is based: Descartes is essentially conducting a thought experiment based on “pretending” that he has no body and no world. But what is left of *Descartes* himself in this thought experiment apart from vague and abstract concepts of “soul” or “will” is unclear; and how the “soul” causally relates to the material world is also unexplained (and, as Kant showed, essentially inexplicable). Ultimately, nothing in Descartes’ argument shows that his “soul” or “will” are independent from the world within which the thought experiment is conducted.

It should be noted that Descartes modifies the reasoning of his argument in his later *Meditations* (Descartes 1642). Here, he underpins the mind/body distinction with the claim that thought, by its nature, is “unextended”, while matter, by its own and independent nature, is “extended”. The conclusion of an ontological distinction between mind and body is therefore only more dogmatically stated – albeit with the ambiguously nuanced concession that the body and mind combine to form a kind of “unit” (Descartes 1642, 56[81]). The same objections apply, however: There is nothing in the argument to warrant the conclusion that the “unextendedness” of thought is not dependent on the “extendedness” of matter (indeed, the distinction itself, as I argue below, is flawed). The overarching philosophical problem Descartes leaves us with therefore is how to explain the relationship between “thought” and “matter” in worldly existence. As I show in the next subsection, phenomenology solves this problem by rejecting the premise – namely the rigid dichotomy of mind and body. By providing an alternative

to the untenable extremes of materialism and idealism, phenomenology can reveal how “mind” exists *in and through* the body; it shows, moreover, how “thought”, “mind”, “soul”, etc. (all of which I propose to subsume under the notion of “subjectivity”), are necessarily embedded in the material world.

C. First ontological proposition: Subjectivity is spatially, socially, and temporally “extended”

My first ontological proposition is that subjectivity, as a worldly phenomenon, should be understood as spatially, socially, and temporally “extended”. To be sure, there is an obvious challenge to this proposition from the perspective of first-person experience. Self-evidently, subjectivity (as-consciousness) occurs *here and now*; and even though it is *of* those things which are not *here and now* (those things over *there* and those things *past* and *future*), it is undeniably occurring in a *here* which is also manifestly *present*. Furthermore, subjectivity (as-consciousness) is undeniably *mine* – no matter how much I empathise with others; and my body, moreover, appears to be the “seat”, or the locus, of this subjectivity (James 1890, I:242; Heidegger 1927, 151[116]). What, then, does it mean to say that subjectivity is ontologically “extended” in space and time, embedded in material objects and other subjects?

My ontological claim here hinges on the distinction made above between the two senses of the term “subjectivity”. Although my *subjectivity-as-consciousness* occurs to me as *here, now, and mine* (and thus, it is tempting to conclude not only that it originates inside me but that “I”, as an autonomous entity, am sufficient for its existence), it is self-evidently less clear that my *subjectivity-as-a-state-of-being-a-subject* is also *here, now, and mine*. In fact, when I introspectively ask what I *am* beyond my stream of experience, I do not find a Subject/Self but realise, rather, that there is nothing beyond the phenomenon of asking the very question. As Heidegger writes, “‘Behind’ the phenomena of phenomenology there is essentially nothing else’ (Heidegger 1927, 60[36]); or, as Merleau-Ponty more pointedly puts it, ‘there is no “inner man,” man is in and toward the world, and it is in the world that he knows himself’ (Merleau-Ponty 1945, lxxiv). Where, then, does the Subject come from if it does not emanate from *subjectivity-as-consciousness*? How is *subjectivity-as-a-state-of-being-a-subject* constituted? To answer these questions, we need to go beyond descriptive analysis of experience and theorise the hermeneutic structure of subjectivity in space and time. For the purpose of clarity, I break this proposition down into an analysis of *spatial, social, and temporal* dimensions respectively.

i. Material “extension”

My broader claim in this sub-proposition is that subjectivity can only exist *in* and *through* material objects – objects which thereby become existentially meaningful *Objects*. Thus, not only is subjectivity not confined to the “mind”, but it is not confined to the body either. The body is merely the most intimate Object through which a Subject comes to understand its Self. But beyond this body, which is the most inalienable of Objects⁶⁸, subjectivity necessarily understands its Self through the Objects which comprise its material world – a world which, as an existential milieu of the Subject, thereby becomes the meaningful *World*.

To outline the validity of this *phenomenological* argument, let me first briefly offer and critique a similar argument which is popular in analytic philosophy. Under what might generally be called the thesis of *externalism*, many philosophers have argued that mental states are not solely or entirely contingent on internal phenomena. Perhaps most famously (and accessibly), this has been called the extended mind thesis. The “mind”, it is argued, is not only or primarily bounded by the skull, nor is it confined by what is aptly termed the ‘skinbag’ (Clark 2008, xxxviii; 76).⁶⁹ The “mind”, rather, is “extended” across the material world. There are a couple of problems with this argument which are relevant here. Firstly, on its own terms, the argument seems to undermine itself. If the argument that the “mind” is not confined to the head or the human body is true (it seems to me a convincing argument), then the notion of “mind” itself becomes dubious and counterintuitive. To say that the “mind” is extended is to say that the “mind” is not merely or really a “mind”, or that it is ontologically co-extensive with notions which are not “mind” (as we will see, *subjectivity* is a more suitable concept for this kind of argument). Secondly, and more fundamentally, the problem with the analytic perspective is that it presupposes the “space” which separates “subject” and “object” – a “space” across which the “mind” then “extends”. From a phenomenological perspective, as we will see, if the “mind” (or Subject) is co-extensive with material objects, it is not because those objects *over there* “think” (or because they do any of the other things which “minds” typically do); it is, rather, because the mind and object—and indeed, the “space” which separates them—are mutually and dialogically constituted in the phenomenon. Thus, it is not so much the case that my “mind” is “extended” across certain objects, but rather simply that my “mind”—and, indeed, my entire subjectivity—could not exist without those objects, since it exists *in* and *through* them. It is for this reason that I use the term “extension” cautiously.

To my mind, Gadamer (1960b) offers the clearest phenomenological account of how subjectivity is “extended across”, or “embedded in”, material objects. For Gadamer, the ontological dichotomy

⁶⁸ Inalienable at least until death or, as we see below, until dismemberment, when the body becomes “incomplete”.

⁶⁹ For a classic statement of this argument, see Clark and Chalmers (1998).

between subject and object cannot make sense of the phenomenon of experience (the very experience, it should be noted, through which the dichotomy is asserted). Using the example of the experience of art, Gadamer asks how it is that we come to experience an artwork as meaningful. If we grant a subject/object dichotomy, we must then account for how the meaning of the artwork *over there* reaches consciousness which is *here* – a problem which in turn leads to the extremes of either subjectivism or objectivism (the ideas, respectively, that meaning is unilaterally constituted by consciousness or that it resides objectively in the world). As Gadamer argues, this reasoning cannot account either for how consciousness is contingent on the meaning of the artwork (evidenced by the fact that it is a traditional object which we all experience in a similar way), nor for how the meaning of the artwork, as an object of tradition, is contingent on the act of interpretation which takes place through consciousness. It is necessary, rather, to posit an ontological structure of meaning (which for Gadamer is “tradition”) in which “subject” and “object” encounter one another (a structure within which the “subject” can then egotistically assert its autonomy). In Gadamer’s words:

Self-understanding always occurs through understanding something other than the self [...]. Since we meet the artwork in the world and encounter a world in the individual artwork, the work of art is not some alien universe into which we are magically transported for a time. Rather, we learn to understand ourselves in and through it, and this means that we sublimate the discontinuity and atomism of isolated experiences into the continuity of our own existence (Gadamer 1960b, 83–84)

When I say that subjectivity is spatially “extended”, therefore, it should not be taken too literally. Indeed, in its ontological entanglement and fusion with the object, subjectivity—as evident in aesthetic experience—negates the spatial dimension: There is first and foremost the *meaningfulness* of an (aesthetic) experience, and out of this meaningfulness emerge Subject and Object as distinct entities which are spatially separated. The *distinctness* of Subject and Object (which are *here* and *there*, respectively), however, does not *explain* but is *a condition of* their unified emergence. Methodologically, therefore, we cannot start from the notion of an ontologically distinct Subject and then try to understand how that Subject comes to exist in a material world (Descartes’ problem). We must start, rather, from the premise that the Subject is *in* and *through* a meaningful material world, and only then explore how that Subject comes to regard itself and is regarded by Others as an autonomous entity within that world. In the next section, I explore empirically how Subject-Object fusions are established and broken, and what this means ontologically for the Subject.

ii. Social “extension”

Just as a Subject without Objects in relation to which it exists is inconceivable, so a Subject without another Subject—and thus *Others* in general—is also inconceivable. Sartre (1943) illustrates this fact well through the example of shame – which he theorises as an existentially foundational emotion. He asks us to imagine spying through a keyhole at someone. In this moment, he observes, I am a “pure subject” in the sense that I can look without being looked at (Sartre 1943, 392[328]). My “self” as a “subject” does not exist; I am, rather, a pure subjectivity-as-consciousness, looking at the world like an invisible God. He then asks us to imagine that we hear footsteps behind us: Suddenly, I feel shame as ‘an immediate shudder that runs through me from head to toe, without any discursive preparation’ (Sartre 1943, 308[260]). I am no longer merely a looking subjectivity (a *consciousness*), but also a Subject, i.e., and object in the world which the Other can look at. The world, meanwhile, is de-centred from my *hereness* and established as a World as I recognise that I am *here* as a Subject only to the extent that I am *there* as an *object-for-an-Other*; and “I” and the “Other” are thereby bound in a mutually constitutive relationship. Shame, as such, ‘brings about an intimate relation between me and myself’ as I realise that I am one among many subjects in the world (Sartre 1943, 307[259]). For Sartre, therefore, Heidegger overlooked the essential fact that Being is not only *Being-for-itself* (Dasein) but also *Being-for-the-Other*.

Since my consciousness is clearly not ontologically indifferent to my Self which emerges as a Subject through this consciousness, and since, as we have seen, this Subject is contingent on the Other who is over *there* and who recognizes and constitutes me as a Subject, then it follows that my consciousness is—in some significant sense—not *here* but “extended” between Me and an Other; or rather, I and the Other are fused in the phenomenon of subjectivity, and the space that supposedly separates us is negated (in Sartre’s terms, it is a “nothingness”). To be “spatially extended”, therefore, is to be contingent on the material and social world in one’s “own” *being-in-the-world*. It should be noted, however, that the Other does not need to be present, or even need to concretely exist in “reality” – and this has been noted as a weakness of Sartre’s keyhole example (Taylor 1985, 58). As I show below through the case of the Soldiers constitutive Other (the Enemy), the Other just needs to be imaginable such that they provide a reflection of Me as a Subject (Cf. Gilks 2022). Methodologically, therefore, the sociological imperative is to explore how the Other—whether *there* looking at me, spatially absent but mentally present, or merely a product of my imagination—constitutes me as Me and thereby structures my subjectivity (in both of its senses outlined above).

iii. Temporal “extension”

So far, the analysis of how subjectivity is extended has been atemporal and ahistorical: Subjectivity, I have argued, is “extended” across space in the sense that it is embedded in the material and social world

(in constitutive Objects/Others). Yet both the Self and the material and social world within which the Self is is inherently temporal, and it is therefore necessary consider how subjectivity is temporally “extended” – or, we might equally say, how space is itself essentially temporal.

The most basic sense in which subjectivity is temporally extended is the fact that present consciousness is always situated in and “surrounded by” the past and future. William James’ poetical language is insightful on this point when he observes that

Every definite image in the mind is steeped and dyed in the free water that flows around it. With it goes the sense of its relations, near and remote, the dying echo of *whence it came to us*, the dawning sense of *whither it is to lead*. The significance, the value, of the image is all in this halo or penumbra that surrounds and escorts it—or rather that is fused into one with it and has become bone of its bone and flesh of its flesh (James 1890, I:255, my emphasis)

Thus, James later writes, ‘we live prospectively as well as retrospectively’ and our experience ‘is ‘of’ the past, inasmuch as it comes expressly as the past’s continuation [and] it is ‘of’ the future in so far as the future, when it comes, will have continued it’ (James 1922, 87). Subjectivity is *now* therefore only in a very limited and conditional sense.

Beyond this immediate sense of being “surrounded” by the past and future, however, phenomenology shows us that subjectivity is also directed towards more existentially substantial and constitutive notions of Past and Future. Going further than James, for example, Heidegger (1927, 41[20]) argues that the past is not simply something which is behind the present and which “pushes it along”, as it were; the past, rather, is historicised as a Past which can then provide the supportive ground for a present to become a meaningful Present in which existence can truly take root (Cf. Gadamer 1960b, 296). The future, likewise, is not simply that into which the present will eventually intrude; the future, rather, is an imaginary “space”—a Future—into which I project my idealised Self and which constitutes the Present to the extent that it pulls me towards it (in the case of hope) or (in the case of anxiety) makes me shy away from and dread it. The flowing experience of the *specious present* thereby becomes a Present which is bound in a mutually constitutive relationship with Past and Future; and subjectivity should therefore be understood as temporally “extended” to the extent that it temporalizes itself and makes itself contingent on that which it *Was* and *Will-be*.⁷⁰

Within this phenomenological structure of time, we can then understand the processes through which “life” (and “history” more broadly) are *narrativized*. As an ontological structure of time, narrative is more than the temporalization of Being. Narrative structure results from temporalization plus the imaginative imposition of meaningful trajectory – of beginnings, unfolding plots, and ends. Narrative

⁷⁰ On the notion of temporalization, see e.g. Heidegger (1927, 274[231]; Cf. Sartre 1943).

structure, however, is not only retrospectively endowed on a life or on a course of events; it is also sought after in the Present as subjectivity craves a broader meaningful structure within which it can take root. To be extended in time, therefore, is not only to ambiguously protrude into Past and Future as some aimless existence, but to be *meaningfully extended in time*, i.e., to be embedded in some narrative arc within which each momentary experience can be interpreted. In sum: subjectivity (as-consciousness) extends itself in time by temporally situating, temporalizing, and narrativizing itself as a Subject-in-time. If subjectivity (as-consciousness) did not do this, it would be an un-human and inchoate perception of a meaningless environment; and it could not understand its Self.

D. Second ontological proposition: Subjectivity emerges dialectically through significance

My second proposition which follows from the first is that, as an entity which is spatially and temporally “extended”, subjectivity emerges from the significance it itself constitutes. To make this point, it is necessary to outline what I mean by “significance”, conceptually and ontologically. Following Heidegger (see 1927, 120, note 3), I exploit an etymological meaning of “significance” which, from the root noun “sign”, implies the notion of *pointing towards*. Significance, as such, is ontologically established when a meaningful connection emerges between two entities; and these entities are themselves constituted as autonomous entities through the process of connecting or *pointing*. We saw above, for example, that from the phenomenon of *meaningfulness* which occurs when I look at an artwork I arrive at the experience of the artwork as being a meaningful and autonomous Object (which tempts me philosophically towards objectivism); and likewise, I can experience that “I” am an autonomous Subject (which tempts me philosophically towards subjectivism). It is therefore the space between Me and the Artwork which becomes structured with my *pointing toward it* and its *pointing towards me*. This structure is *significance*. Furthermore, we saw that it is a combination of my looking at an Other and the Other’s looking at me which constitutes each of us as autonomous Subjects: As we consciously regard one another, we establish significance between us, and out of this significance we each emerge as Subjects. Significance, as such, is that which we establish in the establishment of our Selves; it is the space-time in which we are dispersed as (apparently autonomous) subjectivities. Furthermore, this significance turns what would otherwise be an atomised spatial-temporal context of incomprehensible moments and particles into structural wholes. Over time and space, *significant encounters* “add up”, so to speak, congealing to form what might be termed “referential totalities” or “totalities of involvements” (Heidegger 1927, 160[123]; 114[82]; 120[87]). These totalities are captured in the notions of Life and World. Thus, although subjectivity is pressingly *here and now*, it is always in

reference (to some variable extent) to broader background structures of significance— structures which we might simply call World and Life.

From this ontology of significance, we can advance to a more thorough ontology of subjectivity (in both of its senses): *Subjectivity-as-consciousness* establishes significance by pointing towards things (things which it thereby establishes as Things, i.e., Objects and Subjects); then, out of this significance emerges the *subjectivity-as-a-state-of-being-a-subject* (i.e., the Self); and this Subject, in turn, makes possible the consciousness on which it is founded by providing that consciousness with a context in which sense can be made of the material, social, and temporal dimensions of existence. Subjectivity, as such, is a miraculous circle which is constituted in the act of constituting; and it can never be abstracted from the significance of the material, social, and temporal context in which it is irredeemably grounded. It follows that if subjectivity negates the significance through which it is dialectically constituted, it thereby negates its Self; and if it affirms that significance, it affirms its Self.

By way of conclusion, we can offer some basic definitions and methodological implications: First, we can say that significance is *structured meaning*; while meaning is the phenomenon (i.e., the phenomenal experience) of significance. *Meaning*, to be sure, is always structured, but that structure is not necessarily evident in the phenomenon – when I encounter an Other or an Artwork, for instance, I am often engaged and involved in that encounter so thoroughly that I am *lost* in it and cannot—and, indeed, probably should not want to—fathom the foundational structures of my existence at that moment – because like the unveiling of a magician’s trick, such discernment might disenchant World and Self. The sociological imperative (from this phenomenological-hermeneutical perspective), however, is precisely this; it is to articulate these (hidden) structures of significance which make such engagement, involvement or *being-lost* possible; it is, in some sense, to disillusion and disenchant the World and the Life which is in that World, and thereby to understand how such a Life-World is possible.

4.3 The significance of a Soldier

A. Methodological introduction

We have concluded so far that the examination of subjectivity (in both of its interrelated senses) requires elucidating the significance through which subjectivity dialectically emerges. I do this in this empirical section through the case of Harry Parker’s *Anatomy of a Soldier*. In the Introduction to this chapter, I discussed the general phenomenological relevance of this text – specifically, its object narrative literary method, its subject matter of trauma, and the fact that it is (phenomenologically) autobiographical. Now that the theoretical framework for this chapter has been developed, I want to briefly elaborate in this

methodological introduction on how *Anatomy of a Soldier* can facilitate an understanding of the soldier's subjectivity (and how it thereby offers an example of the significance which constitutes War).

I divide the following analysis of *Anatomy of a Soldier* into three dimensions: The material, the social, and the temporal. The overarching reason why *Anatomy of a Soldier* offers unique insights into the *material* significance of the soldier's subjectivity is because of the object narrative literary method. In conventional voices—whether literary, academic, or everyday—matter (and its organisation into “objects”) tends to serve only as the “stage” for the act to unfold (and subjects, as such, are understood as relatively autonomous and independent of their material setting). Parker's narrating objects, meanwhile, show how matter is organised and structured *in relation to* subjectivity, and indeed how subjectivity is itself embedded in and contingent on particular material entities.

In terms of the social significance of the Soldier, *Anatomy of a Soldier* is insightful for two related reasons. Firstly, although the heart of the story is one particular life and the text ultimately offers only *one* first-person perspective of the significance of war (i.e., Harry Parker's, via his protagonist Tom Barnes), the object narrative method effectively decentres the egocentric “I” and imaginatively—through the voice of objects—explores the social web of intersubjective relations which support the “I”'s subjectivity as a Soldier-Subject. In effect, the narrating objects facilitate a unique form of empathy by placing the “I” on a somewhat equal plane as the “You” and the “S/He”. Secondly, and as discussed in the Introduction above, the trauma which the protagonist/author suffers allows a sharp juxtaposition of *War* and *Not-War* as Barnes transitions abruptly from *Soldier* to *Not-Soldier* (i.e., to wounded veteran). As such, the disillusionment of the soldier's subjectivity—the negation of *his* War—highlights the significance of War itself and of the Soldier-in-War. We see, for instance, the contingent significance of protagonist Barnes' enmity once he is disillusioned with war.

Finally, in terms of the temporal significance, *Anatomy of a Soldier* reveals how the Soldier is constituted and dis-constituted *in* and *through* time: As a Soldier, Barnes is *gradually*—but never consummately—constituted through material and social encounters with the Objects and Subjects of War; and he is abruptly dis-constituted as the material force of war destroys the body on which his soldierhood depended.

B. Material significance: The Soldier's being-amid-Objects

As readers of *Anatomy of a Soldier*, we are never in Tom Barnes/Harry Parker' head (as with conventional autobiographies), neither are we accompanying some omniscient—but always implicitly *human*—narrator who looks down on events with penetrating knowledge (as with conventional novels). We are, rather, “in” the objects which surround and are significant for Tom Barnes; and we see Barnes

from these various perspectives, gradually building a picture of the kind of subjectivity he is. Some of these objects—such as his military day sack, his desert boot, or his prosthetic leg—are what I will categorise as *personal* Objects: They are personal to Barnes in the sense that they sustain his immediate subjectivity as a Soldier/Wounded Veteran on a daily basis (metaphorically, they constitute the inner spirals of the broader web of significance in which his life occurs). Other objects—such as the fertiliser (of which the bomb is comprised) or the fake trainer which belongs to his Enemy—are what I will categorise as *peripheral* Objects: They are *peripheral* in the sense that they form the background significance which surrounds and supports a locus of significance (this background significance, as we will see, is no less necessary to subjectivity, but just not as present or proximate to it). Besides these personal and peripheral Objects, there are what I will categorise as *crisis* Objects – such as the bomb, or the call button beside the hospital bed. These objects become acutely personal for a brief period of time, usually a moment of existential flux, in which subjectivity is restructured (I discuss these *crisis* Objects only briefly in this subsection, and more thoroughly in the final subsection under the heading of temporal significance). Piecing together Barnes’ material World in this way will allow us to understand the material conditions through which a particular Soldier exists; and from here we can generalise to understand the broader material conditions of the British war in Afghanistan. As a caveat, however, it should be noted that this analysis of the material World (into personal, peripheral, and crisis Objects) is ultimately for methodological convenience and does not represent the ontological structure of the material World itself – which is less categorical and more continuous.

i. Personal Objects

In the theoretical section of this chapter, I drew on Gadamerian hermeneutics to theorise how consciousness understands itself as *Self* through aesthetically encountering objects – objects which thereby become existentially meaningful Objects. Many of the narrating objects in *Anatomy of Soldier* can be understood as constituting Barnes’s subjectivity by serving this *mediating role* between consciousness and Self; and although this is true to some extent of all Objects within a Subject’s World, including *peripheral* ones, it is especially evident in the case of the most personal Objects. Take, for instance, the several items of issued military uniform through which we come to know Barnes/Parker by seeing him from their perspectives. A newly issued desert boot, for example, begins narrating Chapter 3 as follows: ‘I was taken from a box [...]. My tongue was pulled out and a man wrote BA5799 [Barnes’ serial number] in black permanent marker that bled into my fabric’ (p. 6). As the chapter develops, we see how this boot becomes a part of him, expressing his pride and insecurities as a soldier. In terms of his pride, for example, we hear how, soon after being issued to Barnes,

We were running [...]. We settled into a rhythm and the man breathed with practiced control [...]. He was strong and his breathing was still measured as we pounded on. The fitter he was, the harder he could fight and the longer he could survive (p. 6-7)

Before interpreting the content of this passage, it is necessary to clarify the significance of the literary voice of the narrating object. The “voice” obviously does not belong to the object itself; and if matter is “vital” or “sentient” in any way, I contend that this literary method does not represent that vitalism/sentience.⁷¹ To be sure, the voice is Parker’s – that subjectivity which was once a soldier and at the time of writing was a wounded veteran; and both narrating object and Barnes belong to Parker’s transcendental imagination – that part of consciousness which goes beyond itself and circles back to make sense of its Self. Thus, when the fictitious desert boot “speaks” of a fictitious soldier as exercising with ‘practiced control’ and of striving to be fit so he could fight hard and survive, we are gaining insights not into matter itself—in this case, matter organised into what we know as a “boot”—but into subjectivity and its embeddedness *in* this particular organisation of matter. Specifically, we are learning about a Soldier’s subjectivity and how this Soldier came to understand his Self through certain Objects. In this scene, therefore, we are offered an artistic representation of how consciousness sees and understands itself through a material object – and how Self and Object are thereby (preliminarily) established through a structure of meaning (significance) between this human being and this inanimate object. Barnes/Parker’s consciousness, as such, “goes out” to meet the Object, and the Object then points back towards Barnes/Parker, mediating his consciousness with his Self.

An explicit example of this self-mediation, and one which particularly illustrates the existential formation of the Soldier, is Chapter 39 which is narrated by Barnes’ body armour. Again, the chapter opens by offering a sense of Barnes’ self-image as an experienced soldier:

It was dark [...]. He felt my cover. It was damp from the last time he’d worn me. He sighed, lifted me up, pulled apart my protective plates and dropped me over his head. I passed his face and he smelt the sharp odour he’d layered into me over the past two months. He liked my smell; it was experience and survival. He held my sides together and pressed my Velcro down with the palms of his hands so I drew tightly around his body (p. 271)

Parker observes how the act of donning his armour has become “ritualistic” for Barnes (p. 272); but it is not a ritual in service of the gods or the community, but in service of his (warrior) Self. It is the

⁷¹ Such would be a rather humanist vitalism. In the aforementioned article (Gilks 2021c), I critiqued this vital materialist interpretation of *Anatomy of a Soldier*, which I argued cannot ultimately make sense of the “novel” as a work of art. For a vital materialist interpretation of *Anatomy of a Soldier*, see Bernard (2017). Bernard draws on Bennett’s (2010) vital materialism, among other theoretical approaches.

Object's smell which evokes in Barnes a sense of what he *is*, i.e., an *experienced Soldier*; and Barnes therefore affirms his Self through this perceptible quality of the significant Object.

After this ritual of donning the armour is completed, the moment finally comes when Barnes is going out on patrol. Here, the Object narrates how 'He stood and felt the weight of me. I had become a part of him, another layer of the courage that let him step out of the gate' (p. 272). In this crucial passage, Parker recognises how an essential trait of the Soldier, namely his courage, does not emanate from some "inner" and independent source which we might call "soul" or "mind" but is rather something which is mediated by Objects and as such is constituted in-the-World. This is not to say that Barnes is not a Soldier without his body armour, or that he could not go through the gate courageously without it. It is to acknowledge, rather, that he has become the kind of Soldier he is through his engagement and mediation with a series of Objects which have become personal to him as a Soldier. Indeed, these are Objects through which Barnes/Parker has come to understand his Self as a Soldier. The ontology of subjectivity, as such, must account for how "Self" is existentially produced through one's Self image, and how this Self-image in turn is mediated through Worldly Objects.

So far, I have shown, through the two examples of Barnes' desert boot and his body armour, how material Objects are *necessary* constituents of subjectivity. Yet, as I theorised above, and as will be explored empirically below, material Objects are not *sufficient* for subjectivity (since the existence of subjectivity requires particular Objects, namely other Subjects, through which it can recognise itself as an Object and thus as a Self). Material Objects do, however, facilitate the indispensable existential acquaintances with other Subjects, and this is particularly evident in the case of some of the personal Objects in *Anatomy of a Soldier*. Besides also to some extent pointing "inwards" and mediating consciousness with Self, these Objects serve the existential role of pointing "outwards" and mediating—or *acquainting*—subjectivity (in both of its senses) with other subjectivities. Indeed, for several of the narrating objects this seems to be their main function: Narrating Chapter 25, for example, a letter establishes *literal* significance between Subjects; while Chapter 10 is narrated by a night vision sight which establishes *visual* significance between subjects; other examples include Chapter 23 which is narrated by a map, serving to place Barnes' Self and his Enemy in the same Worldly context; and Chapter 37 is narrated by a service medal which, as I explore more below, points both to the Soldier's Compatriots and to his Enemy. These Objects are meaningfully personal in virtue of their pointing towards certain constitutive Others, Others which in this case allow Barnes to understand his Self as a Soldier.

An explicit (and empirically apposite) example of this pointing "outwards" is Chapter 29 which is narrated by one of Barnes' bullets (p. 194). On the one hand, the bullet establishes the significance of Barnes Self-understanding as a Soldier – as he spends time, for example, lining 'us up into rows of ten and then thirty and then [pushing] us one by one into a magazine' (p. 194). Here, the bullets provide

Barnes something to do and make sense of that doing; he is a Soldier, and so the actions of de-charging, cleaning, and re-charging bullets back into the magazine all make sense of and affirm his identity as a fervent and professional Soldier. On the other hand, however, the existential *end* of this Object is its ability to establish significance between Barnes and a particular Other, namely, his Enemy. Through this example, we also see how the Enemy begins as an “imaginary” entity and becomes more “real” through time and character development. When he is cleaning his bullets in the above-cited passage, for example, it seems that he has not yet met his Enemy in the flesh and as such does not “know” them; and here, the bullet points towards a future possibility which is nevertheless constitutive of Barnes’ present Self (discussed below). The bullet, however, does eventually approximate its *end* and almost consummate itself as a bullet:

We bucked again and the bolt carrier ejected my predecessor, recoiling to sweep me from the top of the magazine and ram me into the chamber. [/] Ahead, a small hole of light shone at the end of a silver right-hand spiral. The weapon wobbled, then steadied, and my cap was hit by the firing pin. My propellant charge ignited, burnt and split me into two, sending the front half of me down the barrel [...] I burst out of the barrel at 940 metres per second [...] My trajectory was predetermined [...] I flew in a flat arc towards my terminal event [...] My target was ahead but pulled away and I silently passed him [...] I slammed into a mud wall (p. 198-199)

As the reader, we are not meant in this scene to empathise with the bullet per se, but with Tom Barnes, that young soldier looking to consummate his identity *qua* Soldier. We are meant to empathise with Tom Barnes who is himself imagining the bullet’s journey towards his constitutive Other, perhaps murderously wishing or simply dreading that his bullet finds its *end*. In either case, the bullet, as a meaningful Object, dramatically establishes significance which is essential to Barnes/Parker’s subjectivity as a Soldier.

ii. Peripheral Objects

Personal Objects, as we have seen, constitute subjectivity both by mediating consciousness with its Self (pointing “inwards”) and by mediating Self with an Other (by pointing “outwards”). Beyond these *personal* Objects, subjectivity is also embedded in Objects which might be described as existentially *peripheral*: Objects with which one is not as intimate and which tend, relatedly, to be spatially less proximate. These Objects, however, are nevertheless essential to existence in that they form the broader existential milieu in which “I”, my personal Objects, and my constitutive Others, can exist. Existing out towards the horizons of perception, they make up the “background” of existence

In *Anatomy of a Soldier*, a few of the narrating objects might be understood as peripheral in this sense. Chapter 24, for example, is narrated by a rug which is bought by a local elder who collaborates

with the soldiers. The rug first narrates its own story (irrelevant to the story of the text) about how it was made and imported; but it then narrates several of the background social events which surround Barnes' life, such as discussions the elder has with other locals about politics. Literarily, this rug serves to tie together loose narrative ends, ultimately contributing to the "novel's" coherent narrative structure; and I want to suggest that its ontological purpose reflects this literary purpose. Since life, like literature, craves narrative structure (or rather, the narrative structure of literature is a reflection of life's narrative cravings and projections), the literary purpose of the narrating object is similar to its ontological purpose as a significant Object. In particular, the rug spans a temporal period and provides the common "ground" for a course of events. As a peripheral Object, therefore, the rug is cohesive of time.

Another example of an Object which seems rather peripheral is the unmanned aerial vehicle which narrates Chapter 33 (p. 237). Significantly, this Object points indirectly towards Barnes' Enemy. But as with the rug, it also ties up loose narrative ends by furnishing the material context of the advanced technological warfare within which Barnes' life is lived. Innumerable other peripheral Objects which are not accorded chapters by Parker in *Anatomy of a Soldier* serve the same purpose of aesthetically enriching the World to make it a credible material space in which life can unfold.

Some Objects are peripherally significant in virtue of being personal to Barnes' constitutive Other. In particular, several chapters are narrated by Objects which are personal to Barnes' Enemy; and Barnes' Enemy thereby evolves from a purely imaginary idea into a concrete material and social reality. Chapter 26 (p. 170), for example, is narrated by a Kalashnikov:

I was made in China. [...] For years I hung off the shoulder of a shepherd in the mountains.
But I was found and cleaned and given to Aktar. I was where he often kept me, wrapped in a cloth, stuffed between the split water tank and the wall (p. 170).

As the chapter progresses, the Kalashnikov narrates how Aktar sneaks up on *his* Enemy (i.e., Barnes), attacks them, gets ambushed by them, and how it is strapped to Aktar's back 'as we sped away and the wind whistled on my barrel' (p. 179). This Object, as such, allows "Parker" to visualise his Enemy in material form (and, paradoxically, to humanize them), and it is in relation to this realised and humanised Enemy that he can approximate his ideal of what it means to be an experienced Soldier.

Another interesting example, narrating Chapter 8 (p. 49) is the fake trainers which belong to another young man who becomes Barnes' Enemy. Through this Object the Enemy is clothed and aesthetically depicted. For the reader (as well, it seems, for the author), we come to empathise with this Enemy by understanding the "trivialities" of his material world; and this process of empathising with Barnes' Enemy facilitates empathy or Barnes himself (and, indeed, for Parker, Barnes' injured author).

My overall ontological claim is that these peripheral Objects sustain subjectivity in a less permanent sense. They furnish the background of conscious experience of the World, providing reference points for one's Self and can serve the purpose of facilitating narrative and existential coherence. By extending beyond the *personal* existential milieu, this analysis is moving methodologically towards the theme of the next chapter (Chapter 5), namely the broader existential milieu—or World—in which the Soldier's subjectivity occurs.

iii. Crisis Objects

In large part, *Anatomy of a Soldier* is a story about bodily trauma and about how subjectivity suffers this trauma. Although the narrative progression of the story is fragmented as the objects narrate the events in an achronological order, there is a coherent overarching trajectory which emerges, namely that from a fervent soldier, through bodily trauma and the existential crisis it precipitates, and towards an eventual acceptance with his bodily condition and redemption. The objects which narrate the moments of crisis are particularly insightful in that they reveal the inner processes of a subjectivity in flux – how it is ruptured, and how it strives to acquire narrative sense again, and how it acquires that sense in a different bodily condition. Although the crisis of subjectivity will be discussed more in the final subsection of this chapter when I discuss the temporal structure of Barnes' subjectivity, I want to introduce the notion here to provide a contrast with the personal and peripheral Objects already discussed. By way of methodological definition, a *crisis* Object is neither *personal* in the sense that it is not a cornerstone of one's (stable) subjectivity, but neither is it peripheral; it is, rather, acutely personal for a brief period of existential crisis. Many of the narrating objects in *Anatomy of a Soldier*—such as the bomb itself, (narrating Chapter 4) or the surgeons oscillating saw (narrating Chapter 13)—might be understood as *crisis* Objects. The main literary function of these Objects is to describe the acute moment of trauma from the perspective of the material world; and as I explore more below (Section 4.3.D), they are particularly insightful from a phenomenological perspective in their ability to reveal Barnes' subjectivity in radical transition.

iv. Conclusion

Heidegger's famous example of our involvement in the material world was of a carpenter hammering:

with this thing, for instance, which is ready-to-hand, and which we accordingly call a "hammer", there is an involvement in hammering; with hammering, there is an involvement in making something fast; with making something fast, there is an involvement in protecting against bad weather; and this protection 'is' for the sake of [un-willen] providing shelter for Dasein—that is to say, for the sake of a possibility for Dasein's Being (Heidegger 1927, 116[84])

In this subsection, I have tried to elaborate how the soldier is existentially involved in the world of war. My underlying argument is that subjectivity requires a material world in and through which consciousness can understand its Self and its World – however “real” or “imaginary” (“fictitious”/“illusory”) that Self and World may be. It is through Objects that we come to understand our Selves, both *inwardly* (who we are to our Selves) and *outwardly* (who we are to Others). We embed our Selves in a *personal* material milieu of Objects with which we become intimately involved and familiar; and through these Objects we express our identities to the World. More broadly, and as will be discussed more in the following chapter, we are involved with *peripheral* Objects which make up the broader World within which our personal lives take place. Finally, and as will be explored more towards the end of this chapter, this material milieu can enter crisis for a number of reasons; and during such crises, the meaning of Objects evolves, shifts, or is utterly negated, and subjectivity is thereby nihilated and must—if it is to survive—reconstitute itself. Thus, we can conclude that “I” and “world” are co-constituted; and that the Cartesian thought experiment which posits that I may be *real* while my world is illusory is fundamentally flawed since “I” am only as “real” as my world, and if my world is illusory then so am “I”, since “I” exist only insofar as I am a reflection of *my* World. The philosophical and methodological challenge, as such, is not to answer whether the “I” and the “world” *are* or *are not* real, but to show how and why they become real and how they thereby sustain particular subjectivities.

C. Social significance: The Soldier’s Being-through-Others

In this subsection I argue that everything that *Anatomy of a Soldier* is—an object narrative “novel”, a *Bildungsroman*, an autobiography, a critique of war and self-in-war, indeed, a concrete book sat on my desk—only makes sense when considered within the broader social significance of enmity (what I have theorised as *Being-against*). All this to say that *Anatomy of a Soldier* is essentially a war story; and like all other war stories, it is grounded in the fundamental significance of *Being-against*. Thus, although the pages of *Anatomy of a Soldier* are substantively filled with the objects’ descriptions of the social encounters that Barnes has with various of his comrades (as a soldier) and with his family and medical staff (as a wounded veteran), these social relationships only make sense in relation to the significance of Barnes/Parker’s enmity.

To make this argument, I propose an ontological distinction between two types of constitutive Others which can be understood as forming two types of social relationships in *Anatomy of a Soldier*. Firstly, and most fundamentally, there is what I will term the *essentially constitutive Other*. Generally, this is the Other in virtue of which one can *Be* a certain role in society: The Patient to the Doctor, the Child to the Parent, the Student to the Teacher or, in this case, the Enemy to the Soldier. Although, in the case of *Anatomy of a Soldier*, this Other is relatively latent in Barnes (/Parker’s) experience, this is

the Other which is most essential to his Being, both as a Soldier and as a Wounded Veteran (as someone who has renounced his *Being-against*). The second type of Other is what I will term the *inessentially constitutive Other*. This is the Other without whom I can still be what I *am*, but who nevertheless buttresses my social identity in an everyday way. For Barnes, this includes his comrades, his family, and the medical staff. It is through this distinction that I am able to argue that the fundamental significance of *Anatomy of a Soldier* is Barnes'/Parker's *Being-against*. I begin by exploring the significance of Barnes' *inessentially constitutive Others* and then consider the grounding significance of Barnes' Enemy.

i. *The inessentially constitutive Others: Medics, family, comrades*

Barnes' self-identity is mediated by various Others, none of whom are essential to the story of what it means to be a Soldier in general, but each of whom is nevertheless essential to Barnes' own story in the sense that it is through them that he comes to understand his Self. It is through these everyday encounters with medical staff, family, and comrades—social encounters which fill the pages of *Anatomy of a Soldier*—that Barnes *recognises* his Self (existentially) as a Soldier or a Wounded Veteran.

Phenomenologically, some of the most interesting scenes of *Anatomy of a Soldier* are narrated by medical objects, many of which describe Barnes when he is unconscious in the acute stages of his injury. A breathing tube, for example, narrates how

Nurses cleaned you again. Your skin had yellowed and your head rested at an unnatural angle. Once the nurses were happy, the glass door opened and a doctor brought in a man and a woman who were not wearing medical clothing. [...] The man looked down at us with determination. The woman clutched a red handbag and looked drained and shocked. [...] They returned many times and sat by you and waited. The woman would steal a chance to touch your hand when no one was looking, worried she was doing something that was wrong and might damage you (p. 29).

Such scenes have led some to understand *Anatomy of a Soldier* from a materialist perspective (Bernard 2017). Although these narrating objects seem to possess a kind of epistemological omniscience, knowing more than Parker could ever have known about his Self, I believe such scenes can be better understood from a phenomenological perspective (Gilks 2021c). Indeed, the omniscience of these objects exemplifies a logic which is central to existentialist phenomenology, namely, the process through which a subject understands himself as a Self by seeing his Self through the eyes of another (Sartre 1943). In this case, Parker is seeing his Self not only through the eyes of the nurses and his parents, but also from the perspective of objects; and the fact that Barnes (/Parker) was unconscious at

the moment when he was seen does not alter the existential structure of the shame he feels. For much of the text, indeed, Barnes is merely a body being treated by Others and described by Objects. My broader existentialist claim here is that one cannot understand oneself without the mediating gaze of an Other – no matter how fictitious or imaginary that Other may be, or no matter how conscious one is at the moment when one is actually being looked at. It is through the literary device of object narrative that Parker illustrates this basic logic of Self-understanding. These Others, therefore, are constitutive of Barnes/Parker's Self-knowledge.⁷²

Some of the most powerful and significant social encounters which fill the pages of *Anatomy of a Soldier* are those Barnes has with his family, especially his mother and father. In Chapter 20, for example, a razor narrates how Barnes' father shaves his beard in hospital after his injury: 'he propped his son's head up and pushed a pillow under his neck. "It's about time, Tom. You look like you've been boozing for a month" [...] He looked down at him and thought how much thinner he seemed – how sickly' (p. 133-4). If we understand *Anatomy of a Soldier* as essentially autobiographical, as I suggest we should, it would seem that Parker is here *recognising* his Self through his father's eyes in his new debilitated condition. Indeed, it is through an encounter with his mother than Barnes proclaims his acceptance of his "incomplete" condition (the proclamation is narrated by a bed, placed especially downstairs in Barnes' house because he cannot yet climb the stairs with his prosthetic legs):

'I wouldn't change it,' you said to her. 'Sorry, Tom?' She turned around and looked at my covers. 'What needs changing?' 'I wouldn't change it.' You took a sip from the mug. 'Any of it.' She came and sat on me and looked at you. 'I don't understand.' 'I wouldn't change what happened to me.' 'Of course you would.' Her brow was creased. 'You don't have to say that, Tom.' 'I mean it. It's part of me now. I know I can't change it anyway, so it's a stupid thing to say, but if someone walked in and asked me if I wanted to go back and for it never to have happened, I'd say I wouldn't want to.' She shook her head. 'You don't mean that.' 'I do.' You grinned at her. 'It's hard to explain but it's already too much a part of who I am [...]' (p. 208)

Engaging with Barnes as a fictitious character, it is hard to believe, as his mother says, that he truly means what he says; it is hard to believe that acceptance could be so complete and binary. And if we imagine what could have motivated and inspired Parker to write such a scene, it is hard to believe that he is not himself—through the fictitious mother of his fictitious protagonist—also trying to mediate his Self by imaginatively experimenting with acceptance through art. In either case, it is through these

⁷² Indeed, Parker's narrating objects becomes Subject-like, and end up playing the same role that other Subjects play in normal life.

social encounters—both real and fictitious—with family that Barnes/Parker achieves progress in understanding his new bodily condition.

As a Soldier, the Other in relation to whom Barnes' identity is most substantively established seems to be his military comrades. They are with him from beginning to end, both in mundane, everyday moments, and in moments of crisis. They were with him at the beginning when he is becoming a Soldier. A desert boot, for instance, describes how, at 'breakfast [before their departing flight to the warzone] other boots like me fidgeted under the table' (p. 9). And they were with him in his moment of most acute need when—as described by Barnes' tourniquet—'he was lifted onto a stretcher and he bit deeply into the arm of the man who carried him' (p. 2). They were the object of his jealousy when he sees, stood injured on the parade ground receiving a service medal (which narrates the scene), that it didn't happen to them, that they still naively believed 'they were invincible and knowing it would never happen to them' (p. 265).

As the modern trope of war has it, these are the men *for whom* Barnes fights (a trope which, as we will see, wrongly suggests that their *Being-there* were sufficient for Barnes to participate in war).⁷³ They are the people with and through whom Barnes/Parker understands his existence as a Soldier. As the service medal narrates: 'He knew them all. He had been a part of them, one of their best; he didn't mind the arrogance of thinking that – it didn't matter now' (p. 262). These are the constitutive Others alongside whom Barnes becomes a Soldier by communally imagining encountering the Enemy – an Enemy which constitutes them as Comrades.⁷⁴

⁷³ When the soldier proclaims that he "fights *for* the man beside him", I postulate that he does not understand his own motives. In a volunteer army, there is of course no need for them to fight for one another – they might have not placed themselves in such a situation in which they would need to fight for one another. In my view, this trope confuses the effect for the cause: War tends to produce strong sentiments of camaraderie, and this sentiment is confused for the cause of the war itself. This fighting *for*, as we will see, must be understood in the broader context of fighting *against* the Enemy.

⁷⁴ For the Soldier, the Comrade is an Other who challenges the ontological distinction I have made between the *essentially* and *inessentially* constitutive Other. While Barnes could still be a Soldier without the family members and medical staff through whom he mediates his injured Self, one could not be a soldier without Comrades in the sense that one cannot fight a war alone. I want to suggest, however, that the Comrade is not ontologically fundamental in the sense that Comradeship is not what defines Enmity, Enmity, rather, is what defines Comradeship.

ii. *The Soldier's essentially constitutive Other: The Enemy*

Each of the social relationships discussed above are *inessentially constitutive* of Barnes' *Being* as a Soldier and Wounded Veteran (except, perhaps, for the comrades, which as noted challenge this working distinction). Although he concretely comes to understand his Self through them, Barnes could still have been what he *was* without them. I now want to argue that the significance of these social encounters, and, indeed, the significance of *Anatomy of a Soldier* as a work of art, stands relative to the fundamental significance of Enmity which structures not only Barnes' life (both as a Soldier and a Wounded Veteran), but also the text as a work of art.

I begin this argument by noting that it is easy to forget that *Anatomy of a Soldier* is essentially a war story. The "enemy", after all, is only directly referenced a dozen times (and indirectly referenced as "they" a few more). Furthermore, Barnes never really meets his enemy, and as such never seems to consummate his Self as a Soldier. It seems that the closest he comes is when one of his bullets misses them (p. 198-199), as cited above. For this reason, and because the substance of the text is dominated by scenes of family and medical encounters, we might read *Anatomy of a Soldier* primarily as a story about trauma and recovery within a context of war. Such a reading, I argue, would be to get lost in the text and overlook its overall literary structure.

The bodily and existential crisis Barnes/Parker suffers, for example, only makes sense within a social context of war. Although Barnes' trauma seems to be immediately characterised by a loss of bodily abilities, this loss is mediated by the way in which he formerly prided himself as an able-bodied Soldier (a soldier which he can no longer be). There is no objective self-judgement here: Barnes is traumatised in relation to who and how he used to *Be*. Barnes, as such, is not primarily alienated from the material reality of war, but from his former Self; and this Self-alienation is the context of his existential trauma.

It is also clear that *Anatomy of a Soldier* is essentially a story about war if we look at the general literary structure of the text. Although most of the 45 objects which narrate the chapters point directly towards Barnes' own existence (many of which are *personal Objects*), several of the chapters are narrated by objects which belong *personally* to Barnes' enemy. In one sense, we might pass this off as merely "fiction", an attempt to create an interesting novel and build a coherent war story. I want to suggest, however, that these objects, like the medical objects which describe Barnes in his state of unconsciousness, are the product of Parker's transcendental imagination as he is trying to make sense of a life such as *his*. Barnes (and presumably Parker) never knew his Enemy – they were simply a "they", an Other which Barnes had pledged to fight. Yet, thrown into bodily and existential crisis, Parker must make sense of how he got there. He therefore imagines his Enemy, building a bomb (which narrated Chapter 4) with fertiliser (narrating Chapter 2). He even empathically imagines the fake

trainers (which narrate Chapter 8) that one of his enemy proudly wears. Bouncing back and forth in time and space, the narrating objects therefore gradually piece together a world of enmity which is sufficient to explain Barnes' condition as a wounded veteran.

So far in this chapter, I have discussed the material and social significance which constitutes the subjectivity of a Soldier. In the first subsection, we saw how subjectivity is inwardly and outwardly mediated through Objects and how the material World is thereby constituted. Despite the fact that War tends to make the material World indubitably manifest, the material reality of war is not its essence but might rather be understood as the "stage" or "ground" upon which the *social* drama of War unfolds. In this subsection, I therefore explored how subjectivity is mediated through other Subjects, Subjects through whom we can objectify ourselves as Selves. In order to deepen this understanding of spatial significance, it will be necessary to see how subjectivity is structured in time.

D. Temporal significance: Becoming and Unbecoming the Soldier

The significance of time has already been implicit in the analysis thus far. Take, for instance, Barnes' bullet described above (which narrates Chapter 29). The meaning of this bullet is not atemporal but exists, rather, in virtue of the fact that one day (in a Future which Barnes imaginatively posits) it might touch the flesh of Barnes' Enemy, thereby constituting both its identity as a Bullet and Barnes' identity as a Soldier; and when it touches that flesh, it is significant (for Barnes) in virtue of the fact that *previously* (in Barnes' imaginatively posited Past) the Bullet would have belonged to Barnes and it would have been *he* who pulled the trigger. The temporal constitution of this particular scene is just one example of how the whole World is temporally constituted. Subjects and Objects are bound up *in* time – which is to say that all signification takes place *in* and *through* time. Time, as Gadamer puts it, is the 'supportive ground of the course of events' (Gadamer 1960b, 296). Thus, the object becomes an Object and the subject a Subject in virtue of *Being* in relation to its Self in the Past and Future.

In this final subsection, I focus on the constitutive temporal significance of the subjectivity of Tom Barnes. How is his *Being* or *not-Being* a Soldier contingent on temporal processes; how does Barnes *Become* and *Unbecome* a Soldier? I analyse the structure of Barnes' temporal existence in chronological order: I begin by exploring how he matures existentially as a Soldier; I then explore the crisis of his subjectivity in trauma; and I end by briefly considering how he redeems his Self as a Wounded Veteran. This example of the temporal significance of one subjectivity in War will offer an insight into the temporal significance of War more broadly.

i. *The maturation and consummation of subjectivity*

My premise here is that subjectivity (as-consciousness) is never static but always pointing towards some Future ideal of its Self – at least when it is in its healthy state and not negating its Self in despair. My contention, however, is that this Self cannot be existentially consummated, but only ever striven towards. One can never become the ideal of what one *is* for the simple reason that that ideal cannot exist except as an imaginary notion towards which one strives. The concrete Subject is always a vague, messy, and historically contingent instance of a given ideal; and it can never perfect its Self. The Soldier, for instance, can never consummate his identity as a *Soldier*; he can encounter his Enemy, die in the service of his Compatriots and be glorified and idealised by them, but his concrete existence is only ever *in relation to* this ideal which he and various Others (including his Enemies and Compatriots) transcendently project onto the World.

For Barnes, in the period prior to his injury, the ideal towards which he strives is the *experienced soldier* (an ideal which is representative of the contemporary Western soldier more broadly⁷⁵). Several of the narrating objects describe this striving. We saw, for instance, how Barnes liked the ‘sharp odour he’d layered into’ his body armour, a smell which represented ‘experience and survival’ (p. 271). We also saw how, through his desert boot, Barnes’ sought to become fit enough to fight and survive (p. 6-7). Narrating Chapter 6, Barnes’ military day-sack captures the beginning of his process of Becoming a Soldier:

BA5799 bought me from a surplus store in a garrison town while he was still in training. During my first exercise he tried to get me dirty so I no longer looked new but battered and experienced – not how he felt but how he wished he felt (p. 31)⁷⁶

The closest Barnes comes to approximating *his* ideal is narrated by a helmet in Chapter 41:

⁷⁵ As has been shown (King 2013; Cf. Huntington 1981; Janowitz 1960), a culture of professionalism has come to define the contemporary Western combat soldier. This professionalism is characterised by expertise which the soldier earns through experience. Thus, contemporary Western soldiers pride themselves on this experience. There is, if you like, a parallel hierarchy of who has experienced the most, especially in terms of live combat. This is evident, for example, in most contemporary British memoirs, which tend to egotistically brag about personal experience (I discuss this more below in Chapter 5).

⁷⁶ In an interesting act of empathy, Parker describes a parallel scene where his enemy ‘stopped and scuffed me [a white trainer] against the hard mud of the side of a ditch, trying to get me dirty so I looked battered and experienced – not how he felt but how he wished he did’ (p. 50). This is also an interesting example of how Parker (transcendentally) imagines his essentially constitutive Other and, as we will see below, an indication of his moral disillusionment with war.

The sun had sharpened and beat down on me and his head was hot and sweated into my pads. His clothes smelt and chafed where his kit pressed in. His shoulders ached under the straps that pulled them back and he felt thin and spent under it all. [/] But he could do it; he could endure it, and more. He had wondered why people thought soldiering was romantic, and knew if they swapped places with any of his men most would crumble under the pressure and fear, the smell and heat. But he could feel the romance now as he watched the single file of men, with their day-sacks and helmets and antennas, bobbing up and down across this foreign land (p. 297)

For Barnes, the ideal seems to entail being in a foreign land with one's comrades (a joint adventure story), and then having contact with the enemy. The encounter with the enemy, as that Future possibility, is central to the adventure story; and if their enemy were not there, it would merely be a story about "adventure training" (something the British military also markets itself as providing). This is obviously an historically contingent ideal of what it means to be a Soldier; and I will explore in the next chapter how this romanticism is central more generally to the British soldier's experience in Afghanistan.

Phenomenologically, Barnes' striving towards his ideal of Soldier offers an example of how subjectivity temporalizes and narrativizes itself. At any given moment, the Soldier exists in relation to some Past and Future Self. When he is finally experienced, Barnes' Past Self is that inexperienced recruit; and when he is inexperienced, his Future Self is that experienced Soldier who will have travelled to a foreign land and will have encountered his Enemy on the battlefield (that Self which will be "baptised by fire", to use a modern trope of war). There is therefore a discernible narrative structure of what it means to be a Soldier; and, in an attempt at understanding and consummation, Parker projects this narrative onto his (transcendentally imagined) Self. For Parker/Barnes, however, this process was abruptly interrupted by something which was 'never going to happen to him [because] he was meant to be lucky. But he wasn't, and it had, and he'd failed' (p. 262) – "failed", that is, to follow the proper narrative structure of "Soldier".

ii. The crisis of subjectivity: Dismemberment and disillusionment

For Barnes, dismemberment and disillusionment are intertwined processes. As we have seen, Barnes' pride as a Soldier was contingent on certain bodily abilities; and when his body was dismembered, he could no longer recognise his Self as a Soldier. The acute bodily and existential trauma therefore marks a rupture in the temporal significance of Barnes' subjectivity; and through an examination of how this temporal significance is ruptured it will be possible to see more clearly how Barnes' identity as a Soldier was established.

The immediately most shocking scenes of *Anatomy of a Soldier* are those which narrate Barnes' dismemberment. This begins, most acutely, with the explosion itself. Chapter 42, for example, is narrated by the shockwave:

I existed for a fraction of a moment. I was created by an explosive reaction from a device which functioned to form me. I passed through rock, through mud, through dust, through the air, through the sole of a boot. [/] Through a man. [...] I crushed him against gravity. [/] He couldn't stay whole (p. 299)

Several other perspectives are also offered, including by the fertiliser which goes into the bomb (chapter 2), the bomb itself (chapter 4), and the battery which detonates the bomb (chapter 14); and through these Objects and others, the reader can build a picture of the significance of the material World which sustains this War. Barnes' dismemberment, however, is not finished at the blast. Later (chronologically, but not in the text) a zygote fungus narrates how 'I live in the soil. [...] Something happened that meant I was suddenly inside you [...] It was an instant that compromised you completely. [...] I made you feverish and feasted unseen on your insides, defeating you' (p. 58). We then hear the result, from the perspective of the surgeon's oscillating saw:

He [the surgeon] let my weight descend. My blade-end cut through bone, flashing splinters of dust from the thin trench I gouged out [...] Suddenly I jerked down and was oscillating free in the air. [...] I had changed the body's proportions forever. It no longer filled the space it should (p. 83).

If, as I have been arguing, and as the title of Parker's "novel" suggests, Barnes' subjectivity extends beyond his body—that most intimate and inalienable of Objects—to the personal Objects through which Barnes comes to understand his Self, then we might also understand the destruction of those personal Objects as a form of metaphorical dismemberment. Indeed, we hear how these Objects are brutally torn apart from Barnes' body. Barnes' helmet, for example—his 'window on soldiering [which] framed the action' (p. 291)—narrates how 'He led his men towards the camp [...] We came to a dip in the road and in a flash there was no longer any romance' (p. 298). Then, in the next paragraph, the helmet goes on to describe how 'he'd been taken away in a helicopter and I was no longer with him [...] One of the men carried me into a room and put me in a cardboard box' (p. 298). The reason why this literary scene is so powerful is because the reader, through an empathy for Barnes, has come to recognise the significance of this Object. Barnes' dog tags offer another perspective: 'It banged around us and lifted you with it. [...] Your face was stretched in shock next to me as we existed in a shaft of violence. [...] All you knew was that something was wrong' (p. 301). The chapter then ends: 'They didn't have to split me and my tags stayed on my chain. I was taken off you by doctors before they operated and placed in a plastic wallet with your other records' (p. 306). Again, to the extent this scene

is moving it is because we recognise the relative significance of this Object in relation to Barnes' subjectivity. These personal Objects, therefore, show how it is not only Barnes' body, but also the significance of his World, which is being "dismembered".

Barnes' bodily crisis precipitates an existential crisis. This is represented explicitly in the text itself. Narrating Chapter 28, for example, a mirror—mounted in the toilet at the rehabilitation centre—describes how

he caught his reflection in me and stopped. What I showed was different from how he imagined himself. He saw the freakishly short limbs and the space between them and the floor, where he used to exist. He knew I reflected what others saw, and it shocked him (p. 192)

This passage captures the essence of Barnes' existential crisis: His inability to recognise his Self. It also captures the social significance of his subjectivity: Barnes' shame is mediated by how he imagines Others seeing him; and without this hypothetical Other, he could not see himself as a Self (phenomenologically, the mirror is an interesting Object through which we see ourselves as the Other sees us; we become a sort of Subject to our Selves).

Since Self and World are mutually constituted, this crisis of Barnes' Self mirrors the broader crisis of his World – a process which I am theorising as *disillusionment*. Barnes' service medal (narrating Chapter 37) captures the essence of his disillusionment. While he should—according to the narrative—have been proud to stand in front of the clapping audience as a Soldier receiving his medal, he instead 'wondered what they were clapping for. You shouldn't clap failure, he thought and he was ashamed' (p. 263). The chapter ends with the medal narrating how 'I was put in a drawer and forgotten' (p. 265). The medal is of course symbolic of what it means to be a Soldier in that it is a symbol of communal gratitude for service. Yet for Barnes it has become an insignificant Object; and this insignificance is a reflection of his own disillusionment, his inability to *Be* as a Soldier. The significance of Barnes' World and Self are therefore mutually negated.

So far, I have been considering Barnes' crisis of World and Self by way of examples within the text. More broadly, however, the existential crisis which the explosion precipitates is represented not only within the text itself but by the text as a whole, as a phenomenological autobiography. By transcendently imagining the material processes through which an "incomplete" body such as his is produced—through the explosion, and then through the life-saving medical processes—it seems that Harry Parker is artistically representing his own bodily and existential crisis. As we saw above, he could not have witnessed many of the processes which produced him since he was unconscious; yet, in order to make sense of what he has suddenly become, he needs to imagine how he got there, and the text as a whole—although a work of fiction—is one example which sufficiently explains those processes. Art, therefore, is an exercise in making sense.

In this subsection I am exploring how subjectivity is temporally structured as subjects temporalize and narrativize their Selves. The narrativization of Self of course borrows from societal notions of what it means to *Be* (or “play”) a certain role; and for the British soldier, as for the contemporary Western soldier more broadly, this means becoming battle-hardened, being “baptised” through “contact” with the Enemy, and perhaps also being disillusioned and morally enlightened.⁷⁷ For Barnes, however, this “maturation” of subjectivity is abruptly interrupted when he steps on a mine. Through exploring the trauma to Barnes’ body, and by implication to his Self and World, I have tried to reveal how subjectivity is contingent on its temporal significance (how it is meant to follow certain narrative scripts, and how if it fails to do so, it enters crisis). In the rest of this subsection, I will briefly explore the processes through which Barnes gradually re-constitutes his subjectivity as a Wounded Veteran.

iii. The redemption and reformation of subjectivity

Subjectivity is a vital entity – which is to say that it strives towards its own realisation. So far in this chapter, we have seen how it achieves this: In its healthy affirmative state, it *projects*, both outwardly and inwardly, and establishes a structural significance within which it can *Be*; and it is through this mysterious *projecting* that it tends towards becoming a Self in relation to a World and Others. *Anatomy of a Soldier*, as we have seen, offers a stark example of how these tendencies can be interrupted: The significance which Barnes had established as a Soldier is suddenly negated, and he finds himself in a state of existential despair. As a vital force, however, Barnes strives again towards a sense of Self; and briefly considering this will shed light on the phenomenon of subjectivity in war.

For Barnes, the redemption of Self ultimately comes in the form of the re-acquisition of bodily ability – indeed, that same ability on which he prided himself as a Soldier. The final chapter of *Anatomy of a Soldier*, narrated by Barnes prosthetic running leg, essentialises this redemption:

[in the park] You started bouncing up and down as you warmed up your muscles and remembered the feel of me. I flexed below you as you moved from one of us to the other and we sprang back and you felt our energy and lightness (p. 310)

We then hear how he runs through the trees, and how the legs are not a burden but liberating; in fact, he is ‘free of the weight of [his] other legs’ (p. 311). The prosthetic leg even comes to re-embody Barnes’ pride as ‘We overtook another runner’ (p. 311). Barnes then falls and draws the attention of passers-by; but he rejects their offers to help him and clambers back to his car. Then ‘you smile and

⁷⁷ I discuss how disillusionment is a contemporary culture of war in the following chapter. On the notion of “baptism” in contemporary war culture, see Harari (2008, 59; 215).

laugh at the pain and blood dripped from your hands. And tears came because you could, and it didn't matter any more. It was normal.' (p. 312-313). Without this ending, *Anatomy of a Soldier* would have been predominantly a story about trauma and crisis. Yet this brief and final chapter changes the significance of the whole text. Rather than pointing to nihilistic despair, it points to the miracle of *Being* – to the *projective* potential which is the fundamental condition for the possibility of subjectivity.

4.4 Conclusions

The broader argument of this thesis is that War is a phenomenon which is embodied, and that this embodiment constitutes its continuity as a structure of history. In this chapter, I have sought to offer an extreme case of this process. Beginning with the notion of *subjectivity*, I explored how the subjectivity of a soldier—as someone who essentialises the embodiment of war—is constituted and dis-constituted in time and space. I began by theorising the phenomenon of subjectivity, making two ontological propositions: That subjectivity is spatially and temporally “extended”; and that subjectivity emerges dialectally through the significance in which it exists. Building on this theoretical basis, I then considered how the subjectivity of one soldier was constituted. I broke the empirical analysis down into the categories of material, social, and temporal significance respectively. Under the heading of material significance, we saw how the soldier mediates his Self (as a Soldier) through the Objects of war. Certain Objects point “inwards” to affirm his Self; while others tend to point “outwards”, establishing the Self's connection to the World. In the following section, I then explored the *social* significance of the Soldier's World. Here, I argued that enmity is the overarching social significance of the Soldier's Being; that although the Soldier's World is invariably rich with many social relations, that all these other social relationships must be understood in the context of enmity. Finally, I considered how the material and social significance of the Soldier's Being is underpinned by the temporal structure of the Soldier's War. Here, the case of Barnes is illustrative: The narrating objects of *Anatomy of a Soldier* reveal in detail how the individual strives to become the Soldier through embodying War; and the trauma which Barnes then suffers reveals the existential contingency of this embodiment.

Overall, my methodological focus in this chapter has been at the level of *subjectivity*, and this has facilitated an understanding of how the Soldier (as a Self) is produced, and ultimately how War itself is constituted. By focusing on the Subject, however, we have only been able to vaguely depict the “space” within which the Self finds itself; in particular, we have only explored the significance of a few Worldly Objects and how subjectivity exists in and through these Objects. In the next chapter, I shift the analysis from the Self to the World within which the Self must exist. Rather than focusing on the Subject or on individual Objects, I consider more holistically the World or “scene” in which the act of Self takes place.

5. World: The Afghan War Scene

It is the artist who is truthful, while the photographer is mendacious
(Auguste Rodin, cited in Merleau-Ponty 1960, 186)

5.1. Introduction

Being, as Heidegger shows us, is necessarily *in* the World; and to understand how the soldier constitutively embodies war, it is necessary to understand the World in relation to which he becomes a Soldier. The aim of this chapter, as such, is to deepen an understanding of how the soldier constitutively embodies war through an understand of the World within which he exists. To do so, this chapter conducts an interpretation of contemporary “official” British war art. The British military institution—in its aesthetic self-consciousness—has a long history of commissioning artists to “represent” it on canvas; and this tradition has continued, albeit through different institutional processes, during the technologically advanced war in Afghanistan. In accordance with the overarching theoretical framework of this thesis, this chapter interprets this art from a hermeneutic-phenomenological perspective. I explore how the artist, through certain aesthetic and compositional decisions, can facilitate an understanding of the World which reflects the British soldier’s Being.

Despite certain methodological limitations (discussed below), I argue that “official” war art offers a unique sociological value to explain and understand the soldier’s existential milieu. This argument entails two broad theoretical steps. First, I draw on Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception, particularly his essay *Eye and Mind*, to theorise the artist as someone who illustrates the constitutive powers of perception that are otherwise taken for granted by those who are truly “lost” in the World. This provides a theoretical basis for understanding the soldier/artist not as merely “seeing” the world, but as constituting it through a projection of “inward tapestries”. Second, I draw on Gadamer’s hermeneutic aesthetics to culturally situate the artist and critique the notion of genius: That which the artist discloses is not some divine and detached beauty, but rather a significance which is essentially related to the World it depicts and to the viewer who finds the work meaningful. The Truthfulness of the work of art, as such, is theorised as its ability to disclose the hermeneutic structures of the World. Combined, these two theoretical steps allow me to theorise “official” war art as possessing unique sociological validity: The artwork is not merely a “re-presentation” which would ideally be substituted with a photograph, or better yet, live video footage; the artwork, rather, is comprised of

aesthetic and compositional decisions, and these artistic decisions are *potentially* indicative of a deeper hermeneutic Truth which would be lost through the aperture of the camera.⁷⁸

Before describing the structure of this chapter, it is necessary to clarify two methodological issues. First, what is war art; what constitutes “official” war art; and how does the status of “official” war art relate to the validity of the method adopted in this chapter? Drawing on Laura Brandon (2007), I understand “war art” from a *sociological* rather than an *art-historical* perspective. “War art”, as such, is not an artistic genre but rather ‘an expression of culture’ (Brandon 2007, 5). As Brandon reasons, ‘war art, more than any other subject of art, is hostage to events that do not relate to changes in materials, the move of an influential artist from one locale to another, and influential styles’ (Brandon 2007, 4). Thus, the war artist is not understood as randomly imposing aesthetic form onto the war, but rather as being “inspired” by the event of the war itself and its socio-historical context. Below, for example, I will explore the significance of the fact that the British War in Afghanistan seems to have predominantly inspired Impressionist painting – which I will suggest reflects a particularly Romantic British attitude towards war. “War art”, as such, can be defined simply as ‘art shaped by war’ (Brandon 2007, 3). I use the term “official war art”, meanwhile, to refer to war art which has been sanctioned by one of the warring institutions - in this case, by the British state; and “official”, as such, is relative only to the institution which sanctions it.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ This is not to say that the photograph cannot convey hermeneutic insights (see Gilks (forthcoming), where I discuss how war photographer Tim Hetherington captures the hermeneutic truth which structures the lifeworld of the American soldier). My claim here, rather, is that the Impressionist painting has unique potential to explore the *constitutive* power of sight.

⁷⁹ “British state” is of course vague and is meant to capture the evolving institutional processes through which artists have been commissioned/contracted by British institutions to “represent” military activities. Although the British military has a long legacy of aesthetic self-consciousness, the process of commissioning artists was formalised in an unprecedented way during the First World War when, in 1916, the propaganda department, which later merged with the Department of Information, sponsored various artist. The Imperial War Museum, established in 1917, was then charged with collecting art which documented the war (Imperial War Museum 2021). At the outbreak of World War Two in 1939, the British government established the War Arts Advisory Committee; and Sir Kenneth Clarke, the head of this committee, emphasised the importance of artistic *interpretation* and the insufficiency of the camera (Tolson 2021). Although these centralised government institutions were discontinued after World War Two, the Imperial War Museum established the Artistic Records Committee in 1972 ‘to fulfil a perceived need for records of contemporary conflicts in which British forces were engaged’ (Imperial War Museum 2012). In the context under discussion, it seems that the Imperial War Museum had a prominent role in mediating the recruitment of artists to accompany British troops in Afghanistan. In some cases, however, artist seem to have been commissioned directly by military regiments.

The credibility/validity of the argument of this chapter (that “official” British war artists “access” and disclose the structure of the lifeworld of the British soldier), however, does not hinge on the specific processes through which the artist was contracted/commissioned. It is certainly relevant that the artist is British and that they have some understanding of what it means to be a British soldier (of the society the soldier comes from, the significance of the military within that society, etc.); it is also relevant that they regard the military in an honorary way, and that the commissioning institution (whether the Imperial War Museum or individual regiments) deemed that the given artist would seek to “accurately” (i.e., Truthfully, in a hermeneutic sense) document the war and not exploit the position as a platform for personally/politically motivated critique. Yet, more important, I believe, is the *attitude* of the given artist towards the military, whether expressed through the artwork itself or through public statements. For this reason, I focus my analysis on what the artwork itself “says”; and I accompany this interpretation, where feasible, with contextual and biographical information about the artist. It is relevant, for instance, that two of the artists I consider below were British soldiers in younger life; that another is explicit that he is seeking to understand his “forefathers” who fought for Britain in the World Wars; and that another is expressively honours the military way of life (biographical details which are no doubt related to their being contracted/commissioned as “official” war artists).

The second methodological issue has to do with how I have selected the artworks interpreted. During the course of the British War in Afghanistan (2001-2021), there seems to have been at least several “official” artist who have been commissioned/contracted to accompany British troops on the front lines; and each of these artists has produced a publicly available portfolio of somewhere between a dozen and several dozen works.⁸⁰ According to what criteria have I selected from among this body of work? Before explaining the process of selection, two preliminary remarks are in order. The first thing to note is that this body of artwork has currently received no academic attention,⁸¹ and that my interpretation is based on my primary engagement with the artworks themselves in accordance with my

⁸⁰ I am not aware of any official registry of “official” British war artist in Afghanistan, and my understanding of the category is derived mainly from the artists’ own publicity as discovered through Google searches. For an overview, see Maretich (2021). Besides one edited volume (George 2016b), these works are publicly available through the artists’ personal websites.

⁸¹ Contemporary war art more broadly has received scant academic attention – exceptions include a special issue in the *Journal of War and Culture Studies* by Hutchison and Robertson (2015); an edited volume by Kerby, Baguley, and McDonald (2018); see also Green, Brown, and Cattapan (2015); Corris (2017); Messham-Muir (2018); Partis-Jennings and Redwood (2021). Interestingly, much of the literature has emerged from the Australian context; and the focus is overwhelmingly on photography and video art. As far as I am aware, there is no academic literature which explores the sociological validity of (“official”) war art to understand soldiers’ experiences; and there has been no academic literature on the particular artists I consider in this chapter.

theoretical framework. After having surveyed this body of art, the second thing to note is the relative homogeneity and consistency in terms of aesthetic style and compositional decisions, both within each artist's body of work and between individual artists. Broadly speaking: They are all figurative and pretend to "re-present" actual scenes (rather than surrealist critiques, for instance); yet they tend towards Impressionism rather than realism, relying on the artist's interpretative imposition in the frame; and, relatedly, they embrace a degree of abstraction – which perhaps emphasises the validity of painting and drawing in relation to the camera (the camera, as Kenneth Clarke remarked, cannot *interpret* the war scene (Tolson 2021)).

Given this generic consistency, my selection is based primarily on how Truthful I found the work to be – that is, how effectively I believed each work conveys the meaning of the scene it depicts and discloses the hermeneutic structure of the underlying lifeworld. The initial criterion for selection, therefore, was my intuition that the work "says" something insightful about the Afghan War Scene.⁸² Once I had an intuition that a given work had something to "say", I have then sought to articulate this intuition in more communicable terms, both to understand the source of my intuition and to convince the reader that the given work is sociologically valid in its ability to disclose the hermeneutic structure of the soldier's World. As I show below, this involves theorising the work's significance in terms of its aesthetic and compositional commitments. I begin by assuming that artistic decisions are not arbitrary but are (potentially) inspired by the World they depict, and I then try to fathom the nature of that inspiration and its manifestation on a two-dimensional surface in light and colour. As I described in the Introduction to Part Two, the validity of this method hinges on a Weberian notion of "adequacy": On whether the artwork itself "adequately" makes sense of the World it depicts; on whether my interpretation of the artwork "adequately" makes sense of the artwork's making sense; and ultimately, on whether the reader manages also to make sense of the World depicted based on the artwork and on my interpretation.⁸³

Bias, of course, is inherent to this process: The artist will impose their biases on the scene; I, in turn, impose mine on the interpretation of that scene; and the reader will then impose theirs on their assessment of the overall validity of my selection and interpretation of the artwork's aesthetic commitments. It is necessary here, however, to distinguish between two types of bias, one negative (methodologically limiting) and the other which is fundamental to understanding. To be sure, "bias" is a negative phenomenon in a science which aims for "objectivity"; and the aim of writer, reader, and, in this case, artist, should be to overcome personal commitments which sway a more "neutral" or reflective

⁸² I capitalise "War Scene" to emphasise that I am referring to an *existential space* in which both soldier and artist exist (albeit in different roles), and not to the aesthetic representation of that space in art.

⁸³ See Methodological Introduction to Part Two of this thesis.

understanding. From a hermeneutic perspective, however, “bias”—or what Gadamer terms our ‘unverifiable prejudices, presuppositions that have too great an influence over us for us to know about them’ (Gadamer 1960b, 297)—is precisely the object of study. In this Gadamerian sense, prejudice is our way of *Being-in-the-World*; it is the way the World makes sense to us. My aim, as such, is to uncover the extent to which the artist shares the same basic prejudices as the soldier, and to then participate in that way of *Being* for the purpose of understanding. The reader, in turn, is then invited into that World and to feel its transfigurational force. To be sure, this methodological strategy can be misled at various stages by confusing hermeneutic structures for artistic and academic error and idiosyncratic bias, and the methodological challenge is to distinguish between these two dimensions of bias.

This chapter is divided into four main sections. The next section, (5.2), develops the phenomenological-hermeneutical framework that guides the empirical interpretation in the sections that follow. I first draw on Merleau-Ponty’s essay *Eye and Mind* (1960) to theorise the Impressionist painter as someone who discloses the constitutive powers of sight, and I then draw on Gadamer’s aesthetics to theorise the hermeneutic relationship between the “official war artist” and the British soldier. Having laid this theoretical groundwork, Sections (5.3), (5.4), and (5.5) empirically consider different dimensions of the contemporary British soldier’s World in Afghanistan. Section (5.3) begins by considering the *spatial horizons* of the contemporary Afghan War Scene.⁸⁴ I show that the soldier’s World is a clearly defined “space” (a “field” of battle or a “theatre” of war), and that this “space” is delineated by horizons which contain and constitute it. Through an analysis of several artworks, I highlight two dominant spatial horizons of the Afghan War Scene, namely, the Romantic-Orientalist landscape, on the one hand, and the romanticised and mystified haze, on the other. The meaningfulness of the World, however, is not static in time, and Section (5.4) therefore considers the *temporal horizons* of the Afghan War Scene. I show how official war artists have managed to capture the historicity of the British soldier’s World by infusing their depictions with their own historical prejudice – prejudice which I suggest is indicative of the ways in which soldiers evoke historical meaning through their own actions. In this section, I also consider some prosaic imagery from a memoir by a British soldier as a way of illustrating how history is articulated in experience. Having delineated the World spatially and temporally, Section (5.5) then examines the content of that World, what I term the *loci of meaning*. I focus on the soldier’s body (including his facial expression and his bodily gesture) and the machine of war; both, I suggest, have been romanticised and have become dominant loci of meaning in the contemporary British soldier’s World. This focus on the loci of meaning also brings the focus back from the World to the aesthetic encounters discussed in the previous chapter which constitute that World.

⁸⁴ For a discussion of the phenomenological notion of *horizon*, see Chapter 3, Section 3.3 (D).

In the conclusion, I offer some general reflections on the genre of “official” British war art as a means of understanding the soldier’s existential milieu. I discuss this art within a broader historical context as a way of emphasising the contingency of what contemporary artists have chosen to depict and the style they have chosen to depict it in. It is significant, for instance, that official British war art in the contemporary era tends to be Impressionist and focusses on Romantic and tranquilised scenes of war (obscuring, for example, the violence which is enacted “behind the scenes”). I suggest that this obfuscation is indicative of how soldiers anticipate, live, and remember their experiences. If each war calls for its own aesthetic forms and artistic responses, then the British war in Afghanistan has called for serene Impressionism – an indication, I suggest, of the way in which these war experiences have been and continue to be romanticised.

5.2. A phenomenology of Impressionist (war) painting

A. Introduction

This chapter is premised on the assertion that official war art can reveal how the soldier’s World is meaningfully structured. But how, exactly, does a two-dimensional and abstract composition of colour convey this insight; how can a *painting of* British soldiers teach us what it is like *to be* a British soldier? More specifically, what is the ontological status of the artwork itself; what is the role of the artist in producing this work; and what is the relationship between the viewer and the artwork? In this section, I attempt to answer these questions by drawing on Merleau-Ponty’s essay *Eye and Mind*. Merleau-Ponty offers a framework for conceptualising the artwork, specifically the Impressionist painting, as a means of conveying the enigma of vision. Through Impressionist painting, Merleau-Ponty argues, the artist reveals to us how the World is perceived as meaningful. This phenomenological theory will then be leveraged throughout the chapter to understand how the soldier’s gaze transfigures the environment before their eyes into a meaningful War Scene which validates their behaviour; and official war art, I will argue, can disclose the aesthetic forms through which this transfiguration is achieved.

Merleau-Ponty’s theory cannot, however, show us how sight is culturally and historically contingent; and to this end, in the second sub-section I complement Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology with Gadamer’s hermeneutics. Gadamer offers two main insights which are relevant here: First, he enables us to understand how the soldier’s transfiguration of the landscape is historically influenced; and secondly, he enables us to situate the artist as someone who is also embedded in history. In the final sub-section, I briefly discuss how we, as viewers, are capable of interpreting war art, and how the artwork, hermeneutically understood, invites us to enter the World of the soldier.

B. The artistic method, and the enigma of vision

To understand the methodological utility of “art” (and especially Impressionist painting) as a phenomenological method of study, Merleau-Ponty contrasts it with “science”.⁸⁵ As Weber says, the “things” which are studied in science must be converted into concepts and explanations which are communicable – concepts and explanations which can thereby be contested and falsified (Weber 1903, 264, note 71). Science is therefore necessarily detached and estranged from the things it studies and is only concerned with *outcomes* (and *variables* only to the extent that they are communicable and explanatory). In Merleau-Ponty’s words, ‘Science manipulates things and gives up living in them’ (Merleau-Ponty 1960, 159). In contrast to science, Merleau-Ponty conceptualises art as that which ‘draws upon the fabric of brute meaning’ (Merleau-Ponty 1960, 161). As a method, therefore, art is understood not as detached from the things it examines (like science), but as somehow “capturing” their brute and manifest existence.

Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the artistic method in contrast to the scientific method rests on a deeper phenomenological critique of representationalism. In a strict sense, depictions informed by visual experience (including realist painting) and captions of that visual experience (such as photography) are not re-presentations – if by “representation” it is understood that some objective “space” is being grasped by the painter or the camera in its objective state. This is because all depiction—and, indeed, all sight—is necessarily *perspectival*; things which are seen are seen in virtue of the perspective from which they are seen (i.e., they are never objectively “seen”). As such, all contrast, all shape, and all colour exist in virtue of the perspective of the “subject” who is seeing. Thus, from the phenomenological perspective, “Realist” and figurative mediums do not “re-present” objective space; if they “re-present” anything, it is a particular perspective upon that space.

Many “Realist” and figurative artists do *seek*, however, to re-present reality – and this ambition, from a phenomenological perspective, is precisely their shortfall. In their attempt to emulate the camera (and, indeed, in thinking that their “eyes” are merely organs which capture light), Realist painters can tell us only what lay “objectively” before the eye (the geometry and the texture of the environment), but they cannot tell us what is *seen*. A classic example of this kind of phenomenological error is captured in a photograph of mountains, a depiction which *re-presents* only the geometric properties of the mountains as they exist before the retina, but not their *magnitude* as they are *seen* and perceived by the *Being* who stands before these mountains (indeed, when we enquire about the *experience* of standing before a mountain it is the *sense of magnitude* we are interested in and not the formal topographical

⁸⁵ It should be noted that by “art”, Merleau-Ponty is referring primarily to Impressionist painting (and it is precisely for this reason, as I explain below, that his theory is so appropriate for this chapter).

properties, knowledge for which we could consult a contoured map). The Impressionist, by contrast, does not paint the mountain as it exists geometrically before the retina, but rather as it is *perceived* or as it strikes the soul. The Impressionist therefore seeks to capture the “brute meaning”, the *phenomena* as it occurs in subjective experience, and not the “objective” qualities of that perception. As such, the “object of study” for the Impressionist is not the mountain itself but the way that mountain is apprehended in sight. In this sense, Impressionism is more realistic and “truthful” than “Realism” and photography – because it is able to capture the experience of seeing and to articulate the structure of that which is *seen*.

There is, therefore, a double sense in which the Impressionist painting is not a re-presentation: First, in the sense that the painter captures only a *perspective* upon things (and not the things themselves); and second, in the sense that the Impressionist artist intentionally “corrupts” the objective properties of things (as they lay before the organs of sensing), and presents the viewer instead with what is actually *perceived* and *seen* (i.e., what is sensed by the soul). Merleau-Ponty’s critique of representationalism, however, is not primarily concerned with the ontology of the artwork itself, but rather with the conditions for the possibility of seeing which Impressionist art lays bare. Thus, his critique of representationalism depends on a more fundamental critique of *seeing*. A representationalist understanding of *seeing* understands the eye as a camera which creates a design of the “seen” inside the mind; and this “design” is then understood as a “copy” of the “actual”. Such a theory, however, does nothing to explain the phenomenal mystery of what it is *to see*, since it must simply presuppose an inner subjectivity or consciousness which, in turn, *experiences* the eye’s “projection” of the “actual” (of course, this just pushes the problem further away). *Sight*, however, is not the production of an image for some inner “self” but rather the *experience of seeing*; and it is this experience, as Merleau-Ponty shows, which needs to be theoretically accounted for.

“Imminent visibility” (or the “gift of the visible”), for Merleau-Ponty (1960, 165), is therefore understood as part of a broader problem of the “imaginary”; and the problem is to account for how the image arises in the mind’s eye, so to speak. Having very effectively shown that materialism cannot afford a sufficient theory of sight, however, Merleau-Ponty is careful not to succumb to idealism – a position which cannot account for the very real and visceral (and consistent) relationship subjects have to the materiality of the World.⁸⁶ Rather, for Merleau-Ponty there is an intimate entanglement between Self and World, between the seer and the seen. The (mental) image, therefore, is not “borrowed” from the outside world (i.e., the environment) and then somehow constituted as meaningful within the mind (implying a spatial distance between the *seeing* and the *seen*); rather, there exists a ‘promiscuity between

⁸⁶ Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, as such, can be understood as positioned between the extremes of materialism and idealism.

the seeing and the seen' (Merleau-Ponty 1960, 171); and the object of study is precisely this promiscuity, this interaction of Self and World. Thus, the painting, Merleau-Ponty argues,

does not present the mind with an occasion to rethink the constitutive relations of things; [...] rather, it offers to our sight [regard], so that it might join with them, the inward traces of vision, and because it offers to vision its inward tapestries, the imaginary texture of the real (Merleau-Ponty 1960, 165)

The painting is insightful and truthful, therefore, not because it presents to our vision the way things are in “reality”, and not even because it shows us the way things were from a given perspective, but because it reconstitutes, to some extent, the act of seeing, exposing how the thing in itself is always saturated with our imaginative potential. This Merleau-Pontian understanding of the artwork, I want to argue in this chapter, can open new avenues for the sociological interpretation of art which are overlooked when the artwork is understood merely as a “representation” of “reality”.

C. *The artist*

So far, in reconstructing Merleau-Ponty's critique of representationalism and his related characterisation of the insights offered by the Impressionist artist, I have focused mainly on the artwork and its ability to disclose our “inward tapestries”. This will provide a basis going forward to theorise the official war artist as *potentially* disclosing the structure of the soldier's aesthetic gaze which constitutes Afghan. Before making the theoretical (hermeneutic) connection between artist and soldier, however, it will be useful to consider the role of the artist.

For Merleau-Ponty, it seems that the artist serves as a kind of analogy for the possibility of sight. Indeed, ‘the interrogation of painting’, he writes, ‘looks toward [the] secret and feverish genesis of things in our body’ (Merleau-Ponty 1960, 167). More specifically, Merleau-Ponty uses the hand of the painter as a metaphor for the eye: The eye, he writes, is ‘the instrument that moves itself, a means which invents its own ends; it is moved by some impact of the world [i.e., environment], which it then *restores to the visible* through the *offices of an agile hand*’ (Merleau-Ponty 1960, 165, my emphasis). In this metaphor, the painter's “agile hand”—which creates the “seen” by mixing colours which are laid out on a pallet and applying them to a canvas—depicts the activity of the “eye” (in this non-physiological, phenomenological, sense) when it *appropriates* the meaningless geometry and texture of things and

turns them into the mental image that we intimately know to be *sight*.⁸⁷ Thus, like the painter, who is understood not as standing *before* the things they paint (as if the “represented” is *over there* and the painter and the “representation” is *over here*) but rather as the person for whom ‘the things of the world give birth by a sort of concentration or coming-to-itself of the visible’ (Merleau-Ponty 1960, 181), sight is understood not as a projection of the object onto the retina (a “projection” which is then in turn somehow *experienced*) but rather as that imaginary power which springs forth its “inward tapestries” provoked—to some variable extent—by encounters with the “actual”. The artist offers a “model”, as it were, for understanding this mystery of sight.

Besides serving as this metaphor/analogy for sight, the artist is also a concrete person who has acquired the ability to portray such “inward tapestries” as works of art. Merleau-Ponty had in mind a particular artist, namely Paul Cézanne (an artist whose work he thought approximated the ideal which he characterises as a metaphor for the possibility of vision in general). Such artists, Merleau-Ponty argues, can teach us about the conditions for the possibility of sight – and thus about the “reality” that non-artists (people who simply dwell in the World) take for granted. In some sense, the artist is not quite *in-the-World* – for they manage to transcend it by perceiving the conditions which make it possible. In contrast, when one is truly *in-the-World*, sight works ‘in us without us’; and the ‘visible in the profane sense forgets its premises’ (Merleau-Ponty 1960, 167). When we are *in* the World, we see things simply as they appear, not interrogating the conditions for the possibility of that appearance. As I will suggest below, the soldier, who acts fervently within the painting, is *in-the-world*, and as such the premises of his vision remain invisible – he simply experiences *his* World (i.e., a *battlefield/theatre of war*); while the war artist, whose job it is (to some extent) to depict that World, is far enough *in* that World to be able to depict it, but far enough detached from it such that they remain aware of the peculiarity and contingency of the scene’s significance and thus able to capture that significance in artistic form. The artist might therefore be understood as carefully negotiating a promiscuity between the *seeing* and the *seen*.

Merleau-Ponty as such idealises the Impressionist painter as the artist who is able to lay bare the phenomenology of perception. By depicting the “inward tapestries” which we offer *constitutively* to the World, the artist potentially discloses how the World becomes meaningfully structured. The artist is portrayed as a genius who is inspired by the World they depict; indeed, Merleau-Ponty suggests that the word “inspiration” should be taken literally (Merleau-Ponty 1960, 167), where the artist is understood as “breathing in” the (phenomenological) essence of things. Disclosing the brute meaning

⁸⁷ The “eye”, Merleau-Ponty writes, ‘sees the world, sees what inadequacies [*manques*] keep the world from being a painting, sees what keeps a painting from being itself, sees—on the palette—the colors awaited by the painting, and sees, once it is done, the painting that answers to all these inadequacies’ (Merleau-Ponty 1960, 165)

of perception, the Impressionist painter (and the artist in general) shows us how the environment is transfigured into a World. In short, the Impressionist painter “represents” not objective entities but the enigma of vision.

In conclusion so far, I have reconstructed Merleau-Ponty’s examination in *Eye and Mind* of the (Impressionist) artwork and the role of the artist in producing that work. Merleau-Ponty uses this discussion of the artwork and artist to summarise and advance some of the core principles of his phenomenology of perception. As he shows, to see the artwork as a “representation” would be, at best, an impoverished understanding of art’s potential; and at worst, it would misunderstand what it means to be *in* and to *see* the World. Disclosing and celebrating the enigma of sight, the Impressionist painting does much more than produce a copy of the actual. Merleau-Ponty therefore provides a theoretical basis for understanding the phenomenological potential of the artwork. Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological of perception does not, however, allow me to make the theoretical leap from the artist to the soldier. Drawing on Gadamer’s hermeneutics, this is my aim in the rest of this section.

D. The Truth of the work of art

So far, I have explained the artistic and phenomenological value of the Impressionist painting; the sociological validity of this chapter, however, hinges on my claim that the artwork produced by the “official” British war artist can tell us something about how the British *soldier* himself embodies war. It is therefore necessary to establish the ontological and theoretical connection between artist and soldier. In this section, I do this by drawing on Gadamer’s hermeneutics and his critique of aesthetic genius. I argue that the official war artist bears the potential to disclose the aesthetic sensibility of the British soldier. I theorise the official war artwork as emerging from a broader hermeneutic structure of war which encompasses both official British war artist and British soldier. As such, I theorise the (hermeneutic) Truthfulness of the artwork as its ability to disclose the hermeneutic structure of social existence.

Since my argument, from a hermeneutic-phenomenological perspective, is that the official war artwork has a unique sociological value, it will be useful to begin by contrasting this perspective to a caricature of a *representationalist* perspective which understands the Impressionist painting as not possessing any unique sociological value. As we saw above, for the representationalist, the Impressionist painting is simply a copy of “reality”; furthermore, it is a highly imprecise copy, corrupted by an invariably maladroit hand and an inexact eye, errors which are then compounded by aesthetic licence. The artist, as such, merely embellishes something they do not understand; and the artwork offers no *particular* insight into “reality”. Thus, although the representationalist might accept the painting in the absence of other sources, the photograph, or better yet, video footage, would be a

preferable to “re-present” the war. The *aesthetic*, as such, is superfluous to “reality” – something offered merely for the indulgence of the eye; and the official war artist who carries a paintbrush and sketch pad in twenty-first century warfare is doing nothing but continuing an old tradition in collaboration with their military patrons.

Undergirding this representationalist understanding of visual perception is a very particular set of presuppositions, not only about perception but also about existence. For the representationalist, as we saw above, the eye is simply a camera and perception is not only analogous, but essentially akin, to a succession of photographs or video footage of “reality”. Furthermore, the *life* which lives these images is nothing over and above the sum of their parts; life has no overarching narrative structure or aesthetic form which gives meaning to each image of perception. Each image simply is what it is, a corrupt copy of “reality”. The human *being*, as such, is simply an aperture onto the noumenal and objective world.

This representationalist view, I contend, cannot account for and make sense of the *truth* we sense when we experience the artwork; neither can it make sense of the validity of abstraction (which it characterises as “corruption”). To understand the validity of the artwork produced by the official war artist, it is necessary to understand the social and cultural role and function of the artist. In particular, it will be useful to critique Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological notion of aesthetic genius from a hermeneutic perspective. As we saw above, Merleau-Ponty conceptualises the artist as a genius who discloses the enigma of vision. The extent to which this enigma is culturally determined, however, is not addressed within the scope of his analysis: Focussing primarily on visual illusions (such as the effect of shadow on the eye) and physiologic anomalies (such as brain defects), Merleau-Ponty theorises only the general conditions of perception but does not explore their cultural contingency.⁸⁸ From a hermeneutic perspective, however, sight is always historically, culturally, and socially contingent. As Gadamer writes, art ‘is not a timeless present that presents itself to a pure aesthetic consciousness, but the act of a mind and spirit that has collected and gathered itself historically’ (Gadamer 1960b, 83). We must therefore

adopt a standpoint in relation to art and the beautiful that does not pretend to immediacy but corresponds to the historical nature of the human condition. The appeal to immediacy, to the instantaneous flash of genius, to the significance of “experiences” (*Erlebnisse*), cannot

⁸⁸ Merleau-Ponty does hint towards the importance of culture (e.g., Merleau-Ponty 1945, xxii; 192; 205). My aim here is not to claim that the basic conditions of perception which Merleau-Ponty exposes are culturally influenced or determined; rather, I want to explore how Merleau-Ponty’s method can be extended for the purpose of understanding how culture generally influences perception in broader terms.

withstand the claim of human existence to continuity and unity of self-understanding (Gadamer 1960b, 83–84)

To return to Merleau-Ponty's metaphor of inspiration, we must not understand the Impressionist painter as inspiring the fresh air of pure vision, but rather the dense fog of a culture which gives rise to a fundamentally contingent kind of vision.

The inescapable cultural and historical predicament of the artist, however, is not an aesthetic limitation but is precisely that which constitutes the sociological promise of the artwork. The artist *potentially* articulates the aesthetic forms within which life in a given context is lived, forms which pertain to what Gadamer calls the 'hermeneutic universe' (Gadamer 1960b, xxviii) – a term which denotes the historical structure of social existence. The aesthetic preferences of the artist are not random artistic impulses inspired by a timeless and universal genius which sees into the nature of things (indeed, "things" have no such nature but are *constituted*); the artist's aesthetic preferences, rather, are responses to the aesthetic conditions and demands of their social and historical circumstance. Indeed, it is no coincidence, I will argue below, that official British war artists have predominantly employed an Impressionist method which tranquilises and romanticises the War Scene. Such artistic "choices", I contend, should be understood as situated within a particular militaristic culture which has idiosyncratic visual demands. The artistic feat, therefore, is not to escape the world and depict a timeless essence or to provide a superfluous aesthetic pleasure to the viewer. Artistic genius, rather, is to disclose the World for what it *is* by articulating its horizons on a two-dimensional surface with an "agile hand" – thereby showing the viewer what would otherwise have been taken for granted in virtue of being lost in that World. The artist, as such, is *in-the-World*; but they must also transcend that World in order to disclose the hermeneutic conditions for its possibility.⁸⁹ Thus, unlike the subject (soldier) for whom the World is truly a World, the artist manages to aesthetically depict the conditions for the possibility of such a World. If we are to use the term "representation", therefore, the artist is not "re-presenting" their own inner and divine aesthetic impulses which are disconnected from their social circumstance, nor are they "re-presenting" an "objective" and noumenal "reality"; the artist, rather, "re-presents" the aesthetic structure of social existence. Understood in this way, the art produced by official war artists has a clear sociological potential, namely, to disclose the cultural and historical contingency of sight.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ The feat of the official war artist, therefore, is similar to what I argued was Harry Parker's literary feat in the previous chapter. While Parker's method discloses how subjectivity and Self is constituted, however, the war artist potentially discloses how the World is constituted.

⁹⁰ I should note that this characterisation of the Impressionist "artist" is very much an ideal type, an ideal to which every particular artist might be understood as aspiring. It should also be noted that this "feat" is not exclusive to

So how do we theoretically characterise that which the official war artist *potentially* discloses? Building on Gadamer's hermeneutic theory, I want to theorise *Truth* (encapsulated) as the hermeneutic potential of the artwork. The Truthful painting is the one which communicates something essential about the social and historical World it depicts. *Truth* is therefore the hermeneutic structure of cultural meaning which the artist may succeed in disclosing for the viewer; it is that which constitutes the sociological validity of the artwork; and, indeed, as the anchorage in the World, it is that which makes an artwork *comprehensible*. In Gadamer's words, the "truth" of the work of art 'is not its simple manifestation of meaning, but rather the unfathomableness and depth of its meaning' (Gadamer 1960a, 226). This "unfathomableness" and "depth", however, is not something mysterious, but is simply something which resides in each of us, namely the aesthetic foundations upon which the *social* World is constituted.

Based on this theory, the methodological challenge is then to discern and interpret the Truth of the artwork. Since the ideal of the artwork is to disclose Truth, and since no artwork ever achieves that ideal, it is necessary to critically evaluate the *hermeneutic propositions* made by the individual artwork. How, for instance, do we distinguish Truth from artistic licence? For the representationalist, this is quite simple, since any artistic imposition is a "corruption" of "reality". Yet, as we have seen, from the hermeneutic-phenomenological perspective, the artistic "imposition" is precisely that which potentially encapsulates the Truth which this study seeks to understand. Artistic embellishment, such as basking a scene in Romantic light, for instance, should not be methodologically disregarded as a "corruption" but investigated as potentially indicative of a certain aesthetic sensibility towards the World. Embellishment, as such, depicts not an objective "reality" but the artist's—and potentially the soldier's—"inward tapestries" which are projected onto Afghanistan to constitute Afghan. Furthermore, compositional choices, such as perspective and what to include in the frame, should not be understood as subject to the random whim of an atomised artist, but as potentially articulating the dramatic structure of the scene. Indeed, the painting should not be conflated with the still image but rather understood as a depiction of temporal-spatial arrangement which conveys not only movement but also narrative structure.

Ultimately, the hermeneutic challenge for myself as author (as well as for the reader) is to assess the hermeneutic propositions made by the artist and try to decide whether they are Truthful to the World they depict. Although there is no final deductive logic by which this Truthfulness can be methodologically demonstrated, the validity of this method rests, I contend, in the extent to which the

the artist; indeed, the soldier, in a moment of doubt, may experience this same "inspiration", and may recognise the absurd contingency of the World for which he is pledging his life.

hermeneutic propositions made by the artist combined with my hermeneutic interpretation of those propositions can make sense of the behaviour which is enacted in that World.

In conclusion: Drawing on Gadamer's hermeneutics, I have tried to theorise the sociological validity of the artwork. I began by constructing a caricature of a representationalist perspective which I argued ontologically misunderstands the nature and significance of the artwork and overlooks its potential insights. Critiquing a conventional notion of aesthetic genius, I then theorised the artist as hermeneutically situated. I argued that the *effective* artist is the one who articulates the hermeneutic structure of the World they depict; and as such, the artist discloses for the viewer the culturally and historically contingent Truths of perception. In the empirical sections that follow, the aim will be to uncover these hermeneutic Truths in official British war art. To be sure, this hermeneutic-phenomenological perspective is wrought with methodological difficulties; but to discard this art as sociologically invalid would be to overlook its unique potential to disclose insights that other methods cannot.

E. The interpretation of art

Thus far, I have focused on the relationship between the artist, the artwork, and the World (which the artwork depicts). To briefly summarise: We have seen that the painting, in order to be understood, must not be viewed as a representation. The (Impressionist) painting, rather, should be understood as (potentially) disclosing the phenomenological enigma of vision. Furthermore, we have seen that the artist is never outside of culture, and that the artwork, and indeed sight itself, must be understood as culturally and historically situated. The feat of the artist, therefore, is to disclose for the viewer this (culturally influenced) enigma of vision. In order to examine the cultural-historical significance of art (which is my aim below), however, the situation of the viewer (i.e., the interpreter of the artwork) must also be theorised, which is my aim in this final subsection. How are we, as viewers, able to re-cognise the Truth of the work of art?

To begin with, there is an important question about the ontological status of the viewer in relation to both artwork and that which the artwork depicts. Here, I want to conceptualise the viewer of art in light of the critique of representationalism presented above. Just like the Impressionist painting should not be understood as a "copy" of the original, but rather as a work *in itself* which discloses the enigma of vision, then the mental image that the viewer of the work possesses in their "mind's eye" should not be understood as a copy of a copy (mediated by the artwork); *vision*, rather, emerges through the viewer's validating those colours and shapes as signifying three-dimensional space. Thus, just like the painter who used their "agile hand" to transfigure colours on a pallet into *vision*, so too does the viewer's mind take its prompt from actual things and offer to them its inward tapestries. Thus, as Merleau-Ponty

writes, ‘Quality, light, color, depth, which are there before us, are only there because they awaken an echo in our body and because the body welcomes them’ (Merleau-Ponty 1960, 164). In this sense, the viewer—to the extent that they have *understood* the artwork—is much more proximate to that work and to the World it “represents” than representationalism would entail. To the extent that the artist manages to disclose the aesthetic form of the soldier’s World, the artist thereby invites the viewer *into* that World by providing the means for its militaristic transfiguration.

Premised on a similar critique of representationalism, Gadamer describes the act of viewing an artwork as follows:

When a work of art truly takes hold of us, it is not an object that stands opposite us which we look at in hope of seeing through it to an intended conceptual meaning [...] The work is [...] an event that “appropriates us” to itself, it jolts us, it knocks us over and sets up a world of its own, into which we are drawn, as it were (Gadamer 1993, 71)

There is, of course, no guarantee that, as viewers, we will necessarily *understand* the artwork and that it will thereby “take hold of us” in this Gadamerian sense. Moreover, since the aim of sociological research is to *understand*, then it follows that the social researcher who seeks to interpret an artwork must strive to be appropriated by that work and to enter its World of significance.⁹¹ The basic problem here is one of interpretation in a hermeneutic sense, namely about being able to understand the concepts which structure the work. Like the text, the artwork must “speak” to the viewer, and the viewer must therefore be able to comprehend the language of that artwork. In a sociological sense, there must be a hermeneutic overlap between the social observer (viewer) and the socially observed (soldier/artist); the viewer must, to borrow Gadamer’s term, step into to the same “hermeneutic universe” as the soldier and artist. Weber also recognised this when he observed that, as researchers, we employ ‘concepts of *value*, concepts the “meaning” of which we ourselves, as committed, acting, and feeling agents, continually “experience”’ (Weber 1903, 151). It is the task of sociological interpretation to grasp these “concepts of value” which structure the World of the Other.

⁹¹ In a Weberian sense, I want to maintain that understanding is essential for explanation, i.e., the explanation of what is happening or taking place within a given artwork. Indeed, part of my broader thesis is that explaining violent behaviour (as well as broader participation in war) requires being “appropriated”, so to speak, by the (phenomenological) World which facilitates that behaviour. It requires fusing one’s own horizons with the horizons of the soldier who lives in that depicted World (Cf. Caddick, Cooper, and Smith 2019).

F. Conclusion

This opening theoretical section has sought to theorise the artwork, the artist, and the viewer from a hermeneutic-phenomenological perspective. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception, I began by theorising the Impressionist painter as disclosing the constitutive powers of vision. The *seen* is not an objective realm in relation to which the subject stands as a kind of aperture, but rather something the subject projects onto the World. I then drew on Gadamer's hermeneutics to theorise the artist as belonging to a broader cultural universe, and I argued that the feat of the artist is to disclose the hermeneutic contingency of sight which the social actor who is lost *in-the-World* takes for granted. As such, I have laid the theoretical groundwork for understanding the sociological validity of the artwork produced by the official war artist. In the following empirical sections of this chapter, my aim is to consider what the official British war artist can tell us about the British soldier's World they depict. I attempt to interpret the aesthetic and compositional decisions that the artists make with the aim of disclosing something True about the World which prompted those decisions.

5.3. Spatial Horizons: The Romantic Orient and the Hazy Unknown

A. Introduction

As we saw in Chapter 3, a Subject exists *in* and *towards* the World; that is, they exist within an existential "space" which is validated and transfigured by their gaze. Although the spatial metaphor should not be taken too literally, in this section I seek to show how examining the World in spatial terms can be insightful. I explore how the soldier's World is bounded by horizons, and how these horizons constitute the space within which war takes place. The implicit assertion here is that the subject's behaviour must be understood in relation to the horizons which define their World. In this section, I explore the contingency of the British soldier's horizons as disclosed through official war art. In particular, I examine two meaningful horizons of contemporary British war experience, namely, the Romantic Orient, and the hazy unknown. It is my contention that these horizons are two of the most dominant aesthetic frames through which Afghan is constituted by the British soldier. The Romantic Orient refers to a way of experiencing war as a Romantic adventure to the East, to a Biblical and ancient World. The hazy unknown, meanwhile, refers to a frame of experience which tends to obscure the World and reduce the horizons to immediate surrounding; this frame, I suggest, serves to mystify and enchant the experience of war.

B. “Afghanistan” as a Romantic Orient

What does “Afghanistan” mean to the British soldier, and what does it promise in terms of experience? Such a question, of course, cannot be separated from what it means to be “*British*”; and, in turn, what it means to be “British” cannot be separated from British history (specifically, I want to suggest, colonial adventures to the “East”). Going to “Afghanistan”, therefore, will provoke a particular and contingent aesthetic sentiment for the British soldier. In this subsection, I argue that his sentiment is fundamentally a Romantic—and more specifically, an Orientalist—one. For the British soldier, Afghan is a mysterious and serene adventure to a far-away land; it is, moreover, an adventure back in time to a “purer” way of life.

This Romanticisation and Orientalisation of Afghanistan is epitomised in Michael Alford’s *Op Herrick 18* (figure 1).⁹² In this painting, Alford depicts a patrol of British soldiers, interspersed with Afghan soldiers, descending into a valley in Helmand Province in Southern Afghanistan. To the right is a local herdsman, stood beside his children and surrounded by his flock, passively watching the troops as they pass. In the valley below is a small town of characteristic mud-built compounds which borders a turquoise river and is surrounded by green pasture and forest. Beyond the town is a mountain range, constituting the literal horizons; and above the town, in the dusty sky, is a Chinook helicopter which seems to be arriving from over the mountains. This scene is “captured” in the evening light, casting the landscape in a golden glow.

⁹² Michael Alford is a British figurative and Impressionist painter and has been appointed by the British military on three occasions as an official war artist, twice to Afghanistan, and once to Iraq (in 2010, 2013, and 2016, respectively). Like another of the artists I discuss below, Alford is himself a veteran of the British military (having served in the Royal Marines in the 1970s).



(Figure 1) Michael Alford, *Op Herrick 18, I Mech Bde*, ~2013, oil on canvas.

How should we interpret this painting? A first step might be to question the veracity and accuracy of the composition – is this composition “realistic”? In one sense, Alford’s *Op Herrick 18* is credible. Nothing depicted is unbelievable – whether the patrol crossing the crest of the hill, descending onto the plane below, the herdsman and his children, or the Chinook helicopter flying above; even the light, which casts everything in a Romantic glow, is not entirely implausible – given the right time of day and particular meteorological conditions. Yet, in another sense, *Op Herrick 18* comes across as clearly unrealistic and even fantastical – having been embellished, perhaps, by the artist’s imagination (by his “agile hand”, to use Merleau-Ponty’s term).

However, questioning whether Alford’s *Op Herrick 18* is or *isn’t* an accurate representation of a moment in time is to misunderstand the work and to overlook its potential insights. This is clear if we consider Alford’s own intent as an artist – as indicated in his official artistic statement from his personal website. ‘My work always starts’, he writes

with direct observation of the visible world [... I] return to the studio with sketches or drawings. These I use as a starting point for a process that turns raw observation, impressions, into something more abstract and evocative. The process often involves cutting out visual distractions and transient effects so that the resulting image has more power. Time acts as an

important filter for me and so does physical distance between the initial sketch and the painting (Alford 2021)

Thus, Alford's work should be interpreted not as Realist but Impressionist. Although it is informed by raw observation, it is distanced (both spatially and temporally) from that observation by the artist's aesthetic imposition. From a representationalist point of view, this distance could only be understood as producing a corruption of the "reality" as it actually occurred. Yet this is clearly not Alford's (Impressionist) agenda. Alford accompanied British troops on patrol in Afghanistan, equipped with a camera, sketchbook and watercolours, to collect "impressions" of the British war scene; and he then used these impressions to render the work we now see as *Op Herrick 18*. But what, then, is the validity of this artwork? I suggest that Alford's *Op Herrick 18* is hermeneutically important not because it can tell us what actually happened (at one moment in time), but because it presents us with a *model* of the aesthetic frame through which his experiences of the scene in general were filtered; and if, moreover, we consider Alford as (to some extent) an ethnographically embedded observer (which is especially plausible given that he was a British soldier in younger life), then we can hypothesise a hermeneutic connection between the aesthetic frame depicted in *Op Herrick 18* and the frame through which the British soldier anticipates Afghanistan. It is the Impressionist abstraction, facilitated by temporal and spatial distance, which facilitates this potential insight into the hermeneutic structure of British war experience. I am not claiming that *Op Herrick 18* is how the British soldier experienced Afghanistan; my claim, rather, is that Alford's aesthetic impressions offer insight into the aesthetic form which the British soldier projects onto Afghanistan.

So what aesthetic forms does Alford's *Op Herrick 18* disclose? I want to focus on two notable dimensions of this work, namely its Romanticism and Orientalism. Romanticism is a notoriously difficult notion to define, but I conceptualise it here—in line with the phenomenological framework—as a certain *perspective* upon things.⁹³ This *perspective* has certain general features. It tends, for instance, to be anti-rationalist and counter-Enlightenment and places a particular emphasis on the individual human and their ability for self-expression (Berlin 1973, 23). (As I will explore later in the chapter, the emphasis on the individual's self-expression is a typical feature of the British war experience.) Furthermore, as Löwy and Sayre have shown (from a Marxist approach), the Romantic

⁹³ Romanticism is difficult to conceptualise in part because of its philosophical, political, and aesthetic strands. In describing Romanticism as a *perspective*, I am drawing on the work of Löwy and Sayre (2001, 9) who define it as a "worldview". It would be a mistake, I suggest, to conceptualise Romanticism in contrast to Realism (e.g., Furst (1969)). As I have suggested above, from a phenomenological perspective, a definition of Romanticism cannot be grounded in a contrast with "Realism" because "Realism" is an aspiration to accuracy premised on representationalist philosophy, while Romanticism is a frame through which "reality" is experienced.

perspective tends to be opposed to modern bourgeoisie society. Romanticism, Löwy and Sayre argue, is ‘essentially a reaction against the way of life in capitalist societies’ (Löwy and Sayre 2001, 17; 10). In the case of the aesthetic frame of Afghanistan, these core Romantic themes (as I explore below) are expressed specifically through an Orientalist gaze.

There are two main senses in which Alford’s *Op Herrick 18* is Orientalist. Firstly, it is Orientalist in its clear *perspective* from West to East. Representing the “West” in Alford’s depiction is the British soldier: As a conceptual ideal, the British soldier is the product of a Western, capitalist society; and his *raison d’être* is to defend the liberties of that society. According to the dominant narrative of the British war in Afghanistan, these liberties came under threat from the East; and the British soldier, as guardian of the Western state, must travel to the East to protect these liberties. In Alford’s depiction, the Western soldier is captured (allegorically) in their *descent* towards the East. In this sense, Alford’s work exemplifies the soldier’s encounter with the Orient. Is it coincidental, moreover, that the soldiers are actually heading east – indicated by the setting sun on their backs?

Secondly, in line with the Romantic sentiment, Alford’s *Op Herrick 18* is characterised by a nostalgia for the Past; and in its Orientalist formula, the “Past” is represented by the East, while the (technologically advanced) Present is represented by the West. The soldiers, on their Romantic adventure, are travelling back in time on a kind of pilgrimage. As is typical of Orientalist work, this pilgrimage to the Past is expressed in biblical terms (Said 1978, 168).⁹⁴ Indeed, in *Op Herrick 18*, Alford offers a biblical caricature of the Afghan scene. In the bottom right, for instance, is a passive goat herder with his children, nonchalantly observing the troops descend into the valley. In some sense, this herder is characterised as “purer” than the Western soldiers, not corrupted by bourgeoisie society and technological advancement; yet the gaze is also clearly contradictory in its condescension, characterising him as primitive and un-advanced. Furthermore, the valley below is portrayed as a fertile

⁹⁴ The fact that most contemporary British soldiers are not formally religious does not undermine this point, since in their “defence” of a post-Christians society, British soldiers inherit the aesthetic frames of Christianity. Furthermore, Romanticism, as it emerged in the West, is infused with Christian doctrine: As Abrams observes, a ‘conspicuous Romantic tendency, after the rationalism and decorum of the Enlightenment, was a revision to the stark drama and suprarational mysteries of the Christian story and doctrines’ (Abrams 1971, 66). Whether he has a personal faith in this formal sense or not, the British soldier is embedded in a Christian perspective. Consistent with Romanticism, however, these Christian themes are presented in secular guise. Romantics, as Abrams observes, seek ‘to save traditional concepts, schemes, and values which had been based on the relation of the Creator to his creature and creation, but reformulate them within the prevailing two-term system of subject and object, ego and non-ego, the human mind or consciousness and its transactions with nature’ (Abrams 1971, 13). Thus, what Alford and the British soldier see as a “natural” landscape is in fact infused with Romantic, and from this perspective, Christian-Orientalist, themes.

paradise which is basked in a glowing light – a purer and ancient world which is particularly appealing to the post-industrial, capitalist society from which the British soldier travels. As I mentioned above, none of these depictions are necessarily unrealistic. What is significant, rather, is Alford’s creative (and “evocative”) composition, his choice of perspective, light, colour, contrast, etc. – all of which convey the overall mood of the work and are indicative of the dominant aesthetic frame. From this depiction, we might infer that the British Soldier’s experience in Afghanistan is framed as an adventure, or a pilgrimage, to the Orient and to the Past; it is an adventure to a purer, pre-Capitalist and pre-modern society.⁹⁵

The historical significance of Alford’s Orientalist framing of the Afghan landscape and its people, and the continuity of the underlying aesthetic frame, might be understood by comparing Alford’s *Op Herrick 18* with James Atkinson’s *The Valley of the Maiden* (figure 2), painted in 1839 while he was serving as a Surgeon for the Army of the Indus during the First Anglo-Afghan War. The resemblance and continuity between these two “representations” is striking. In both, the Western Army, occupying a commandeering vantage point, is seen descending into, or ascending from, the tranquil and ancient East; in both, there is a passive local (farmer or a fruit vender), relatively indifferent to the passing troops – troops he knows are only visitors, or pilgrims; both capture evidence of the ancient civilisation in the form of architecture; and both bask the whole valley in a religious and Romantic light. Whether Alford or the contemporary British soldiers he depicted had seen Atkinson’s depiction of Afghanistan is not the point. What is significant, rather, is that both Atkinson’s and Alford’s “representations” belong to a broader hermeneutic universe which determines what is “visible” for the British soldier/artist who travels to Afghanistan. Even assuming that Alford was not directly influenced by Atkinson’s painting, the similarity—from a hermeneutic perspective—should be understood not as coincidental but rather as indicative of the underlying aesthetic frames which are available within British society to “re-present” this East. Both works are simply products of a broader cultural repertoire.

⁹⁵ This Orientalist perspective is also explicitly captured in first person accounts from soldiers. To give one example, Mark Ormrod (although his memoir is mainly ego-centric) speaks of an ‘idyllic way of life’ that had not changed ‘for a thousand years’ (Ormrod 2009, 109); one village in particular ‘could have come straight out of the Bible’ (Ormrod 2009, 75). Having read several memoirs by British soldiers, this kind of description is certainly not unique.



(Figure 2) James Atkinson, *The Valley of the Maidan*, 1839, tinted lithograph⁹⁶

So far, I have been discussing specifically the Orientalist horizon of Alford's *Op Herrick 18*, but I want lastly to focus on a more generally Romantic theme, namely the mountains. Alford (as well as Atkinson) offers a perspective which places the mountains as the visual horizon. This perspective, in effect, creates a caricature of a World, an exaggeration of its horizons and a resulting accentuation of the significance of the plane below. It is onto this plane, bounded by mountainous horizons, that the soldiers will descend and conduct their "operations". This is their World, clearly delineated; everything this side of the mountains is meaningful for the soldier, and everything the other side of the mountains is insignificant and oblivious. As horizons, the mountains thereby delineate the War Scene for the ensuing performance of violence. To paraphrase Kenneth Burke, the mountains create the backdrop of a scene which becomes a suitable context for the acts of war (Burke 1945, 3).

In order for the mountains to serve this function as an existential horizon, it is necessary that they are transfigured by the artist's (literal) and by soldiers' (metaphorical) "agile hands". To this end, they are basked in a pure and glorious light and presented as the insurmountable edge of the World. Furthermore, this light plays a part in constituting their (phenomenal) *magnitude* – a magnitude to which a photograph would do no justice. Thus, in a classically Romantic and sublime sense, the mountains

⁹⁶ In *Sketches in Afghanistan, 1838-1842*. Copyright National Army Museum.

create an asymmetry between Nature and Subject, where Nature is glorified, and the Subject, in relation, is construed as miniscule. This transfiguration of the mountains has the effect of enchanting the scene below (and, in turn, of enchanting the soldier's experience within that scene). My overarching contention is that the soldier's "willingness" to enact war and to potentially die must be understood in relation to the transfigured scene.⁹⁷

To conclude this subsection: I have argued that Alford's *Op Herrick 18* offers an illustration of one of the dominant aesthetic frames through which Afghan is constituted by the contemporary British soldier – namely, a Romantic and Orientalist frame. Although I have based this assertion on the interpretation of only one artwork, as will become clear from the other works I interpret in the rest of this chapter, Alford's *Op Herrick 18*, far from unique, simply epitomises this frame. In its general composition, specifically with its reference to biblical themes and the glorification of the natural topography, Alford's *Op Herrick 18* offers a caricature of the Orientalist horizons which persist in the hermeneutic universe of British military culture (and broader British society), ready for the contemporary Soldier to project onto their own adventure/pilgrimage to the East.

C. "*Afghanistan*" as the hazy unknown

In seeking to understand (delineate) the horizons of the Afghan War Scene, I focused in the previous section on its Romantic-Orientalist form (as exemplified in Michael Alford's *Op Herrick 18*); by evoking biblical and sublime themes, this form is explicitly cultural and historical. Another theme of the horizons which emerges in "representations" of British war experience, however, is much less (explicitly) historical and cultural, and focuses instead on the immediacy and haziness of the horizons of war experience. It is this *haziness* of the horizons which is the focus of this subsection. To exemplify this theme, I examine two works by Jules George, another of the officially commissioned British war artists.

Although Jules George, unlike Michael Alford, does not have personal military experience as a soldier, he is explicit that his interest in war is motivated by the experiences of his 'forefathers', specifically, his 'father and his grandfather, both of whom saw active service with the British Army' (George 2016a, 13). Furthermore, he is explicit about how he understands his own work as following in the tradition (in the "footsteps") of official British war artists such as Paul Nash during the World Wars. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that George seems—perhaps inadvertently—to ultimately

⁹⁷ I am not necessarily claiming that this "willingness" is explicit in the soldier's experience, but rather that the overall aesthetic frame is such that such a prospect as death does not deter the individual from engaging in such an activity.

valorise the contemporary British war experience even more than Alford. Indeed, I will suggest that George's is a purer and more modern form of Romanticism than that which I characterised above.

Of all the perspectives available to official war artists who accompanied British troops to the fighting on the front line in Afghanistan, it is significant that George chose, in so many of his "representations" of war experience, to intentionally limit the scope of his visibility by shrouding the scene in a haze. In *Beyond the Wire* (figure 3), for instance, George brings the focus onto a column of soldiers boarding a helicopter by capturing the moment when the downdraft from the helicopter reduced the visibility to the immediate act of boarding. In another work (figure 4), George creates the same effect with what seems to be either the smoke from weapon systems or the morning mist, bringing the focus onto the soldiers' figures, presumably charging the enemy. How should we interpret these condensed visual horizons; and what is their phenomenological significance?



(Figure 3) Jules George, *Beyond the Wire*, 2010, oil on paper.



(Figure 4) Jules George (details unknown; image taken from his personal website)

It would be a mistake, I suggest, to interpret George's depictions of the haziness of the War Scene as a critique of the common soldier's experience (it has often been remarked, for example, that the moral and political perspective of the common soldier is fundamentally short-sighted).⁹⁸ On the contrary, by shrouding that experience in a mysterious haze, George is in fact glorifying and romanticising that experience. One specific way in which George's works achieved this effect is through characterising war as a courageous adventure. In *Beyond the Wire* (figure 3), for instance, the combat soldier is depicted as the one who ventures beyond the safety the main base and out into an abstract world – leaving to the viewer's imagination what that World entails. George expresses this sentiment in a description of his own experience while waiting, in the safety of a rear echelon base, to deploy with the front line troops:

With the constant commotion at the front line, I was itching to get out beyond the so-called 'wire.' The world outside the main bases held an abstract quality for me. I had seen plenty of troops clambering aboard 'helos' and vanishing in a storm of dust towards the unknown, and I

⁹⁸ Napoleon apparently remarked that, if we wanted to know what war was like, we should not ask the common soldier because all they saw was the pack of the man in front.

was now very keen to join them, to see where they were going and to experience something of Afghanistan (George 2016a, 26)

In a phenomenological sense, the Romantic spirit of adventure is constituted by postulating two Worlds, one immanent and one transcendent. The transcendent World is that which is unknown, the World that *Beyond the Wire* refers to; it is essentially an abstract and mysterious place. In George's passage above, it is referred to as "Afghanistan" – but not Afghanistan as the geo-political entity, but rather Afghan as the British soldier's "theatre of operations". It is into this anticipated World that the soldiers are depicted as courageously venturing. This transcendent World, however, cannot exist without the existential certainty of the immanent World, and it is this immanent World that the painting depicts. In this World, the proximate and opaque horizons, existing in the form of a sandstorm, draw the focus onto the central act, namely, that of bounding forth into the unknown. The soldier's departure into the unknown is mysterious – and the implicit (but dominant) message is that we, as viewers, can never know what they experienced. It is in this way that George romanticises the soldier's existence and experience – by illustrating the archetypal modern and Romantic trope of war experience that only those who were there can really know what war is like (see Harari (2008, 299–305)).

The merit of George's art, I believe, is to have captured something essential about the Afghan War Scene. In an existential sense, George ventures far enough into the World of the soldier to be able to embody the Romance and the meaningfulness of the soldiering experience. Like Alford, this is portrayed in the form of a caricature of the World.

D. Conclusion

In this section, I have attempted to describe the spatial horizons of the soldier's World through interpreting the work of official war artists. I have suggested that the contemporary British soldier's World is characterised by two dominant spatial horizons: First, "Afghanistan" is characterised through the aesthetic frame of Orientalism; and second, the experience of the British soldier is shrouded in a haze which mystifies the War Scene. Both horizons are essentially Romantic (although in distinct senses). I have been arguing that these artworks can be used to understand the experiences of the soldiers whose World the works depict. The soldiers' "lived experiences" are of course infinitely richer than any such works of art could capture. My underlying assertion, however, is that "lived experience" is made possible and constituted by an underlying hermeneutic structure; and I am suggesting that these works can articulate these structures.

5.4. Temporal Horizons: *Bringing Forth* the Tradition of War

A. Introduction

In the last section, I examined how “spatial” horizons provide reference points for existence: The Subject situates—and thereby understands—their Self as existing in a given space which is defined by horizons. However, as I have already hinted at through the discussion of Orientalism (which is fundamentally an historical attitude through its evoking biblical themes), the horizons of existence are not only spatial but also inherently temporal; that is, the horizons of the World transcend the present and call forth historical meanings. Through considering four more artworks produced by official British war artists, as well as some memoir accounts, this section examines in more depth the temporal structure of the Afghan War Scene.

Specifically, I examine three aspects of temporality which are expressed in official war art. Firstly, I consider the notion of *timelessness*. By *timelessness*, I do not mean that the given aesthetic form is atemporal; on the contrary, *timelessness* is an aesthetic means of disclosing historical continuity by transcending the present. The artist, as we will see, abstracts away from present historical contingency and reveals a continuity which connects the Present to the Past. Secondly, I focus on an example of one particular vector of historical experience, namely *colour*. Through this example, I show how the historicity of the World is rooted in simple correlations between things past and things present. Further, this example reveals how, in the simplest of qualities, the Subject is able to (re-)cognise the Past. Lastly, I consider how the whole scene (of the Present) is fused with an historical scene. Here, I analyse one painting as well as excerpts from a war memoir.

The analysis of temporal horizons reveals two interesting features of the Subject’s relation to the World. Firstly, the historicity of the World shows that the Subject’s relation to the World is a constitutive one. To the extent that the meaning of the World is grounded in historical continuity, and to the extent that it is the Subject who evokes (i.e., calls forth) such meanings through aesthetic abstraction, then it is the Subject who constitutes the meaningfulness of the World. Secondly, in the act of evoking historical meaning, the Subject transcends objective and diachronic history. It is as if the Subject steps out of time, thereby fusing his own experiences with past experiences and establishing continuity between his own otherwise trivial experience with some broader historical significance.

B. *Timelessness*

As I have already alluded to, by *timelessness* I do not mean atemporality, but rather the recurrence, in time, of historical meaning. As an aesthetic means of conveying an underlying form, *timelessness* is

achieved through an abstraction away from the contingent detail of a given moment in history and the resulting accentuation of a form which establishes continuity between two disparate historical scenes. Michael Alford's *Ops Room* (figure 5) is an interesting example of this. The scene is of an operations room (i.e., a room for commanders to coordinate operations in battle) and is characteristic of the command centre at Forward Operating Bases (FOB) in Helmand Province.⁹⁹ The painting depicts several figures in the centre who seem to be pensive and dedicated to their tasks. The room itself, with its coved ceiling, is characteristic of an Afghan mud-built compound. Although, like Alford's *Op Herrick 18* analysed above, the overall composition is not unrealistic in any obvious or explicit sense, it does nevertheless seem to perpetuate an Orientalist aesthetic, particularly through its composition of light.



(Figure 5) Michael Alford, *Ops Room*, [year and method unknown].

One of the central aesthetic impressions of Alford's *Ops Room*, I want to suggest, is its historical/temporal ambiguity. On the one hand, this work clearly "represents" contemporary British

⁹⁹ A FOB, by definition, is cut off from the broader contingent of allied forces and was usually isolated in a regional town in which the British forces sought to gain influence. Within the town, the FOB would typically be situated in an established stronghold of some kind (a prison, for example). The operations room would then be housed in the natural epicentre of the compound.

troops on operations in the “Middle East” – especially to the eye of someone familiar with modern British military equipment. The outfits, including the green feather-down style jackets, the desert boots, and the desert-coloured Destructive Pattern Material uniforms, for example, depict standard issue military uniforms during the early British deployment to Afghanistan. Furthermore, the soldiers in the centre with their backs to the viewer seem to be focused on computer screens, placing them firmly in an era of advanced-technological warfare. On the other hand, however, these precise historical indications are only faintly discernible. It is not so much that this scene might be mistaken for a depiction of British colonial soldiers in India one-hundred years previously. Rather, what is aesthetically interesting is that Alford’s Impressionist abstraction evokes the form of that previous context. The effect for the viewer, I believe, is to arouse nostalgic sentiments of British military tradition – specifically the longevity of British operations in Eastern geographies.

As an aesthetic form, timelessness points to the raw ability of present experience to transcend itself temporally. As Alford illustrates in his *Ops Room*, the artistic method to acquire this transcendence is a certain form of Impressionist abstraction. Technically, this effect is achieved through a very particular roughness of style, a certain play of light and colour – one which captures only the essential (timeless) forms, while blurring historically contingent details. Done well, as I believe it is in Alford’s depiction, the result is a historically evocative artwork, encouraging the viewer to bring forth historical meanings (of course, the viewer must recognise the underlying form which facilitates continuity). As such, Alford’s *Ops Room* calls forth from the viewer’s imagination certain meanings which are supposed to belong to another period. The artwork’s historical horizons are therefore disjointed from the present that the work is supposed to depict – in this case, I have suggested that the temporal horizons are rooted in an Orientalist understanding of the (Eastern) past.

What can Alford’s technique of historical abstraction teach us about the historical experience of soldiers? As I have been arguing, we should regard the artwork not as a “representation” of a given actuality, and we should consider the artistic technique, therefore, not merely as some “trick” which evokes in us certain historical meanings; rather, the artwork, as a manifestation of meaning, is a product of the artist’s “agile hand” – a hand which in this case is motivated by a nostalgic historical imagination. This depiction is, in some sense, how he perceived “Afghanistan”. Some viewers, indeed, may be unmoved by Alford’s *Ops Room* – perhaps instantly seeing through it to the stereotypical aesthetic forms which are employed to evoke historical meaning. I want to suggest, however, that Alford’s own imagination is representative of typical aesthetic attitudes which are inculcated within the contemporary

British military institutions. On this basis, we can then speculate about the proximity of Alford's own historical imagination to that of the British soldier.¹⁰⁰

C. Vectors of historical experience

If we were to push the hermeneutic analysis of Alford's *Ops Room* and enquire what it is, precisely, that evokes in us an historical experience, we would probably end up with hypotheses about certain colours, textures, styles, compositions, etc., which are continuous with a given historical equivalent. From a psychological perspective, we might then postulate that the mind of the viewer, identifying certain relationships and continuities, automatically (re-)cognizes the given historical significance and assimilates it—with the use of an “agile hand”, metaphorically speaking—into the present depiction. The resulting sentiment of nostalgia (i.e., the “historical experience”) could then be understood as the outcome of these processes. *Historical meaning* (i.e., tradition), therefore, is *carried forth* upon some vector (colour, texture, etc., as they pertain to objects, etc.) which the viewer is able to comprehend within the present image. In this sub-section, I explore the phenomenological logics of this process by focusing on colour as an example of an historical vector. In particular, I show how colour can be used to convey historical significance. In the following and final sub-section, I then offer a more holistic analysis of the historicity of the War Scene.

Of all the official British war artists, Jules George seems to be one of the most explicit about the historicity of his experiences. George eventually realised his Romantic war adventure to go ‘beyond the wire’ and accompany troops on the front line. *Battle* (figure 6) is George's testimony to bearing witness to combat live. ‘In the heat of battle, I sketched what I could’, he writes (George 2016a, 37). He elaborates on his artistic impulse in the following terms:

I had to seize the moment, however fleeting, to scrawl down some marks recording the events as they unravelled. It was as much as I could do. I didn't have time to worry about the quality

¹⁰⁰ The term *evoke*, which I have been using to describe the historicity of the artwork, is particularly apt here. Etymologically, it implies *to call out*, and it is typically used to imply *calling forth*. The phenomenological question which is being addressed is: How does an artwork—a mere “representation”—evoke, in our experience of that artwork, certain historical meanings? A related and underlying question has to do with the role (and agency) of the spectator in this process of evocation. In a different context (of tourists viewing war monuments), I have argued that the embodiment and enactment of these meanings is a form of agency – even if the repertoire of meanings available to a given social actor are inherently limited (Gilks 2021a).

of the work, I could think about that later. It was about getting something down, the bare minimum, in real time – right there and right then (George 2016a, 38)¹⁰¹

Although the work is rough, we can make out in the centre middle ground several (British) troops firing and running from left to right, bounding forward towards the enemy. To the right of them is a red smoke screen, deployed to cover the troops crossing the open ground. Like in George's more formally arranged works, the foreground and background horizons are abstracted, bringing to focus the central act of the soldiers.



(Figure 6) Jules George, *Battle*, 2010, ink on paper.

The hermeneutic significance of George's *Battle* is not so much the work itself, but the artist's own historical reflection on that work (as presented in his edited volume on war artists in Afghanistan

¹⁰¹ As a critical note, George is here expressing a typically Romantic attitude of war experience in the sense that there is a premium placed on first person, flesh witnessing. In this passage, for example, George insinuates that the work acquires authenticity in capturing the chaos of battle live. As Joanna Bourke writes: 'While the category of 'war art' is unclear, it is often assumed that artistic representations of combat represent its exemplary form and that it reached its peak in the nineteenth century. The 'authenticity' of combat-artists is revered: the ability to say 'I was there' and so '*this* is what it looked like' is powerful' (Bourke 2017, 13). As is clear from the British context, this premium on "authenticity" clearly continues in contemporary representations of warfare.

(George 2016b)). In particular, he finds the red which represents the smoke historically significant. He interprets his own work in the following terms:

Set within the muted tones of the dusty and rugged landscape, the bright ‘cadmium red’ smoke was like a large abstract brushstroke that acted as some strange veil or metaphor for protection. There were obvious connotations of blood, but also reference to the bright red tunics worn by British soldiers during the nineteenth century, who had perhaps passed over this very same ground, engaging a compound in a not dissimilar manner many years before (George 2016a, 38)

Here, the colour *red* becomes, for George, the vector of historical experience (as well as the vector of a violent experience); it is the *red* that evokes the Past and assimilates it with the present. In a phenomenological sense, *red* becomes the meaningful horizon of George’s historical experience.

What can George’s account of his own (historical) experience tell us about the potential (historical) experiences of soldiers? On the one hand, George’s historicizing gaze seems to be an idiosyncratic product of his own historical prejudice. As we saw above, he begins, in his edited volume, by describing how he was motivated by his “forefathers” who were soldiers in Britain’s previous wars. Furthermore, his descriptions of his experiences as a war artist betray his personal nostalgia. When he first arrived in Afghanistan, for instance, he describes how he was ‘enthralled by [his] first glimpses of this ancient and arcane world with its stunningly beautiful landscapes’ (George 2016a, 27). George continues to describe his encounter with Afghanistan in the following terms:

Wearing a helmet and body armour and wrestling with my cumbersome kit, once the dust had settled after landing, I found myself staring at what were believed to be the remnants of a nineteenth-century British fort situated within the perimeter of FOB Shawqat. Again, I was transported back to a different era and time; its simplified towers and ramparts like jagged teeth, reminiscent of the many forts featured in the lithographs created from original works by James Atkinson, an artist who travelled with the first British expedition to Afghanistan in 1839 (George 2016a, 27)

George’s historicization of the Afghan war scene seems to have resulted to some extent from spatial and temporal distance. In a later rendition of the same scene (*figure 7*), for example, George accentuates the *red* as the central horizon of the experience. Sociologically, therefore, it would seem that George’s *Battle* expresses little more than his own historical prejudices.



(Figure 7) Jules George, *Battle*, 2011, oil on linen.

On the other hand, we might examine George's artistic venture in a more ethnographic sense. That is, we might think of George not simply as an artist expressing his own idiosyncratic perception, but as a Briton who seeks to interrogate his own historical (hermeneutic) prejudice – a prejudice which is not atypical. This is not to claim that the soldiers attacking the enemy position experienced the red smoke in the same way as George; nor is it to claim that George's historicization of the battle scene is in any specific sense representative (although, from personal experience and from reading war memoirs, I do believe George has much in common with the soldier's he depicts, especially in his tendency to romanticise war). My claim, rather, is that George's experiences as a war artist are exemplary, and that they can shed light on the processes through which historically atomised subjects sublimate their own existence within broader historical structures. Specifically, George illustrates how the historicity of experience can be evoked by the simplest of perceptive qualities – in this case, colour. In this sense, George is an effective official war artist in that he captures something of the *significance* which structures perception (something a photograph could never do). Rather than a limitation, therefore, George's historical prejudice can serve as a methodological advantage and offer insight into the phenomenology of historical experience. In this way, the *British* heritage of war which has been "handed down" to George (and to the soldiers he paints) is "taken up" by George and given life as tradition.

To conclude this sub-section: I began with the proposition that "historical experience" is hinged to certain vectors which carry forth historical meanings. I have argued that George's artwork and his reflection of his experiences as official war artist offer insights into the way such vectors operate in our experience. Thus, the artist, whose job is to be acutely aware of the underlying structure of their

perceptions, unearths and makes explicit the (historical) structure of experience which usually remains implicit in social actors.

D. A fusion of (historical) scenes

Although, as the case of George shows, “history” can be evoked by simple perceptive qualities (such as colour, light, tone, contrast, style, form, etc.), it is often the case that the whole field of perception becomes infused, or saturated, with historical meaning. Indeed, vectors of historical significance must be situated in a broader context of the scene in which they occur and on which they depend; in the case of Georges’ *red*, for instance, it is not the *red* per se which is significant, but, as George notes, the *red* ‘[s]et within the muted tones of the dusty and rugged landscape’ (George 2016a, 38). As such, the vector of historical significance must be hermeneutically situated, both within the scene (i.e., the painting) as well as within the broader existence of the artist (as I tried to do above in the case of George). In this subsection, I therefore offer a more holistic analysis of the scene or frame of perception. As I will show, the whole scene is often understood as an historical horizon. To illustrate this, I consider, in turn, one visual depiction and one prosaic depiction from a war memoir.

In his seminal work on English poetry in World War One, Paul Fussell (who himself fought in the Second World War), observes that ‘Everyone fighting in a modern war tends to think of it in terms of the last one he knows anything about’ (Fussell 1975, 340). In terms of the contemporary British soldier, the available repertoire of imaginings which might be used to frame his experiences includes, for example, Vietnam, the two World Wars, and the Napoleonic Wars, among others. These aesthetic frames might be understood as forming what Gadamer refers to as a ‘hermeneutic universe’ (Gadamer 1960b, xxviii): A symbolic—and, in Gadamer’s case, a quasi-metaphysical—repository of meanings which can be assimilated into immediate experience. These meanings, which subsist through various “representations”—including popular art, film, monuments, education, literature, etc.—are readily available to be *taken up* by contemporary soldiers, embodied and enacted. It is the way in which these “representations” are *taken up* that is the relevant phenomenological and sociological processes which require explanation.

The most powerful of these aesthetic frames for the contemporary British soldier is perhaps ones which have been handed down from “Vietnam”. Indeed, as is borne out in much of the art produced by the British war in Afghanistan, “Vietnam”—to paraphrase Paul Fussell—seems to be the last war that many contemporary British soldiers know anything about. The hermeneutic significance of “Vietnam” is captured well in Matthew Cook’s 2009 *Operating Base Argyle* (figure 8). The painting depicts a military-issued tent set within a British operating base compound. The compound is defended by Hesco barriers topped with razor wire, as seen in the background.



(Figure 8) Matthew Cook, *Operating Base Argyle*, 2009, watercolour and inks on paper.

For anyone who has seen Vietnam war films which came out of Hollywood, the historical reference of Cook's *Argyle* is clear. At one level, the historicity of *Argyle* seems to be "articulated" by several vectors. The green canvas tent, for instance, has a "timeless" quality – *timeless*, of course, in the sense I used the term above, namely of establishing a particular continuity (in this case, between American soldiers in the 1960/1970s and contemporary British soldiers). The light inside the tent is reminiscent of scenes from films of American soldiers performing absurd rituals; and the stormy sky, along with the palm tree, has a tropical feel, resulting in a conflation of disparate geographies (in this case, southeast Asian and central Asian conditions). At a broader level of analysis, the historicity of Cook's *Argyle* seems to be conveyed through a certain style, namely a particular abstraction which blurs the historical specificity and facilitates the perception of continuity. In short, Cook's whole scene is infused with historical significance. In a descriptive caption accompanying *Argyle*, Cook explicitly describes the historicity of this experience in the following terms:

Having been brought up on a bevy of Vietnam war films, winter in Helmand provided many similar images of troops surviving the climate as well as a determined enemy. A cooking fire sheltered from the rain cast amazing shadows and colours in stark contrast to the gloomy, muddy surroundings (Cook, cited in George 2016b, 140)

An (hypothetical) artist, completely oblivious to “Vietnam”, would have had to depict this scene anew, just as it lay before his eyes – and we can only speculate as to what might have been perceived and produced by such historically naïve eyes and hands; but Cook’s gaze, like that of the soldiers whose World he was commissioned to “represent”, was filtered through the frame of “Vietnam”.

As I argued above (in the case of George’s *Battle*), we should not regard Cook’s work as that of an indifferent and disinterested artist, commissioned to offer an “objective” account of war; nor should we regard his prejudice as exceptional or unique. Cook’s work, rather, can be insightfully understood as that of an existentially embedded observer. Indeed, Cook’s *embeddedness* in the soldiers’ militarised World is clear from his biography. Besides travelling to Afghanistan as a war artist seven times between 2006 and 2013, Cook also served as a soldier in the Parachute Regiment and the Rifles over a period of more than twenty-years, service which included a deployment to Iraq.¹⁰² As an artist, therefore, he is well positioned to capture the historical *significance* of the experiences of British soldiers.

So far in this chapter, I have focused on how officially commissioned war art, specifically painting and drawing, can help us understand the structure (and in this section, the *historical structure*) of the soldier’s World. I have suggested that the method of painting and drawing is particularly able—especially when it is Impressionist—to reveal the forms in which perception is structured. Various methods of artistic abstraction, I have argued, enable us to understand how perception is itself conditioned and prejudiced towards the World. The underlying theoretical assertion of this analysis has been—to borrow Merleau-Ponty’s metaphors—that the artist’s “agile hand” is analogous to the soldier’s “inward tapestries”.

Thus far, however, the emphasis has been on visual depictions and their ability to convey (historical) meaning. In the remainder of this section, I consider how prosaic imagery can deepen an understanding of the historical horizons of experience.¹⁰³ In particular, I examine several scenes from Patrick Bury’s (2010) memoir, *Callsign Hades*, which recounts his experiences as a soldier in Afghanistan. These scenes might be considered analogous to the paintings analysed above; yet, as I will show, prosaic imagery has the potential to offer particular insights about the historicity of experience. Firstly, it can capture movement and sequence, and their related historical significance, in a way that the stillness of visual imagery struggles to do. Secondly, since it is less visually explicit, it requires

¹⁰² As mentioned above, all of the artists I have considered so far were either formerly soldiers, as is the case for Michael Alford and Michael Cook, or else, as is the case for Jules George, they romanticised the military life not in a way dissimilar to how soldiers typically romanticise it.

¹⁰³ “Prosaic” not in the sense of being dull or commonplace, but rather as *straightforward* (as opposed to *poetic*) language.

more imaginative input from the reader, leaving the reader more freedom to express their own historical prejudice through their interpretation.

In a broad historical sense, Patrick Bury's account of his experiences in *Callsign Hades* is typical of a modern war story. It is ego-centric, focussing on the author's inner experience of war (as opposed, for instance, to renaissance military memoirs, which tended not to engage in self-indulgence). It follows the typical structure of a *Bildungsroman*, focussing on the author's formative experiences – in this sense, it is typically modern in that it romanticises war as a place of becoming a “man”. Finally, it fetishizes the challenge of combat, and especially the experience of a “baptism of fire”.¹⁰⁴ In each of these ways, and many more, Bury's memoir simply echoes—albeit with a specific literary intensity—the archetypal narratives of modern war experience. Besides its engaging and intense prose, however, what is remarkable about Bury's memoir is how it is able to articulate the boarder cultural structure within which the ego-centric experience and expression occurs. Bury seems at some level to be aware, for instance, of the way in which cultural and historical themes influenced his perception. It will therefore be insightful, within the broader theme of this section, to analyse some passages in which Bury makes explicit and implicit references to past wars, and to contrast these prosaic images with visual imagery discussed above.

Bury's literary style is often explicit in its historical framing. In one passage, for example, he describes a particular experience:

We slip and slide through warm, sticky mud that only hours previously was dust and hard-baked tracks. Skirting around poppy fields, we try to avoid falling into the swamps. It still rains, grey and cold. We come to an over-flowing ditch. The ANA [Afghan National Army] and terp [interpreter] cross nimbly on a thin tree trunk. Not us. Too heavy. We wade through chest-high water, weapons above our heads, as the rain splashes the water and our faces.
Vietnam. (Bury 2010, 109, original emphasis)

The prosaic imagery in this passage is vivid and clear; indeed, the reader might, drawing on the resources of their own “inward tapestries”, paint a picture in their mind – their imagination unhindered by the technical limitations of actual painting. The power and clarity of this passage, I believe, is

¹⁰⁴ In terms of Bury's expression of masculinity, Bury writes: ‘So there it was. The cool element of war. Feeling cool, tough, powerful. Manly, really. It attracted all of us at some level’ (Bury 2010, 81; Cf. 20; 123–24; 158). In terms of his romanticisation of the “baptism of fire”, he writes, for example: ‘My mind races. Tactics. Tactics. But, beneath it all, there is an awareness that this is it. Combat. The experience I have sought all my life. Now I will know if I have what it takes. Now I will know if I can do it’ (Bury 2010, 8; 147–59). My general understanding of war memoirs, both historically and culturally, is based on the work by Harari (2007, 2008).

finalised in its last word, and it is worth analysing Bury's use of italics as a literary device and its contribution to the significance of the entire passage. From the reader's perspective, the intended (historical) significance of the experience is not made clear until the last word. Here, with the mental image of soldiers wading through water with their weapons above their heads fresh in the reader's mind, Bury makes clear how this image should be interpreted: Namely, by assimilating it with comparable images of American soldiers in Vietnam. In its italic emphasis, this last word is more than merely an afterthought; rather, the word circles back and frames the whole passage, endowing a special historical significance on each of the other words. From the author's perspective, Bury's use of italic emphasis—which he employs frequently throughout the memoir—seems to be a voice distinct from the first person “I” which narrates the rest of the text. It seems to represent a deeper awareness of the hermeneutic context in which his experience and action is occurring. In this case, I am suggesting that it represents the aesthetic and historical frame of that experience and action. In short, through this literary device, Bury becomes aware of, and then discloses, the historical prejudice through which he understands his experiences.¹⁰⁵

What, though, does “*Vietnam*”, as an “historical” frame for Bury's experiences, signify? Indeed, what *is* “*Vietnam*”? Bury's historical reference, of course, is not an objective comparison. Rather, Bury's literary establishment of continuity between his own experiences and those of American soldiers during Vietnam is mediated by “representations” of Vietnam which exist in broader culture. In another passage, which makes a more focused historical reference, Bury gives an indication of the kinds of sources which constituted his hermeneutic imagination:

The bullets and RPGs [rocket-propelled grenades] have stopped screaming over our heads. All is quiet. In a darkened corner of our velvet-ordained whorehouse, Joe Bog, a huge, quiet Fijian, is squatting on a cushion, slowly tilting backwards and forwards, gently humming. On his head is a bandanna, tied tight. He rhythmically twirls a green velvet flag, keeping the swarms of flies away. *Apocalypse Here*. (Bury 2010, 190, original emphasis)

This reference, which is to Francis Ford Coppola's (1979) film, *Apocalypse Now*, is unsurprising – indeed, I believe it would be difficult to find a contemporary soldier in the British military who had not seen, and therefore been influenced by, Coppola's Vietnam war movie. “*Vietnam*”, therefore, is not

¹⁰⁵ There are at least three more similar passages which frame the experience in reference to Vietnam; in another vivid passage, for instance, he writes: ‘We quietly stalk through the green twinkle of the orchards, sharp branches seeking our eyes, flecks of light on the ground, brilliant sun above us. *Our secret garden*. Visibility in this undergrowth is fifteen feet. Our best weapon is our ears. There is a thrill to this, an excitement. This is real infanteering. What we joined for. Creeping about in the jungle. Us against them. Fingers on safety catches, eyes on stalks, controlled breathing, hand signals. *Vietnam*’ (Bury 2010, 222).

Vietnam per se, but “Vietnam” as “re-presented” by Coppola.¹⁰⁶ What matters, however, is not the accuracy of the reference, but the fact that the impression of “Vietnam” offered a frame through which Bury could interpret and assimilate his experiences – a frame in which he could sublimate his own existence. In this sense, “Vietnam” constituted an historical horizon for Bury.

Besides his use of italics as a kind of emphatic second voice which frames his experiences, Bury also historically frames his experience in more implicit ways. In one passage, for example, Bury describes how, after a long patrol in the rain, ‘We trudge, like our First World War forebearers, back through the quagmire seventy-six boots have created’ (Bury 2010, 111). The particular historical symbol Bury is referring to in this passage is clearly Wilfred Owen’s famous account of the horror of war in his poem *Dulce Et Decorum Est*. In this poem, Owen describes how ‘*we curse through sludge [/] till on the haunting flares we turn our backs, and towards our distant rest began to trudge*’. Indeed, earlier in the memoir, Bury makes explicit reference to Owen’s poem: Recounting an experience of going to church at Sandhurst, the officer training centre, Bury recalls how his ‘eye catches an inscription above [him]. It is emblazoned for all to see; black stencils on grey marble: Horace’s ‘*Dulce Et Decorum Est Pro Patria Mori*’. The ‘old lie’, as Owen said’ (Bury 2010, 37). Later in the memoir, Bury also paraphrases Owen (without explicit acknowledgement): He describes how a ‘hack’ arrives, ‘desperate for some tales of ardent glory’ (Bury 2010, 243); Owen’s own line reads ‘ardent for some desperate glory’.¹⁰⁷

Bury’s historical framing in this sense is distinct from that created by the use of italic emphasis analysed above. While the literary use of italic emphasis seems to have been a kind of second voice which, at the end of the passage, saturates the whole description in historical significance by offering an historical frame, the use of a single word to convey historical meaning places the historical emphasis on a single term which is embedded in the description; the *word*, as such, becomes the vector of historical significance, reaching well beyond its standard connotations. Indeed, “trudge”, for Bury, means much more than ‘To walk laboriously, wearily, or without spirit, but steadily and persistently’

¹⁰⁶ It is worth noting that Coppola’s “re-presentation” was in fact an adaptation of Joseph Conrad’s (1899) novella, *Heart of Darkness*, only set in the context of the US war in Vietnam. A genealogical analysis of such historical experiences would be interesting from a critical perspective.

¹⁰⁷ Bury also makes *explicit* reference to World War One in the same style of italic emphasis analysed above; one passage, for instance, prosaically depicts a ruined landscape, “reminiscent” (for Bury) of those characteristic of the First World War: ‘We sweep slowly past the torn, splayed tree trunks lying forlornly in the dirt, the stumps, the knocked-down walls, the dried-up river the Taliban have diverted to force us out. The once beautiful glade has been ruined. *World War I.*’ (Bury 2010, 269).

(as the Oxford English Dictionary defines it). In Bury's use of the term, "trudge" evokes the "memory" of the exhausted and disillusioned soldier in World War One; to *trudge* is to have experienced some of the horror of warfare, to have witnessed it at its core. In an ironic and inadvertent sense, therefore, we see in Bury's descriptions how Owens' disillusioned vocabulary and linguistic structures become a means for the contemporary soldier to romanticise war (something I discuss below); it provides a way for the soldier to say, *I have experience real warfare; I have experienced warfare comparable to World War One*. This example shows how even something as mundane as walking through mud can be transfigured into something historically significant.

E. Concluding hermeneutic reflections

To summarise this section: In the previous section, I explored how the soldier's World (i.e., the War Scene) is structured in reference to spatial horizons. In this section, I have explored how the World is structured in relation to temporal horizons. I divided the discussion into three subsections. I began by conceptualising a notion of *timelessness* and used Alford's *Ops Room* to exemplify this feature of historical experience. *Timelessness*, I suggested, is a kind of precondition for historical experience; it is the temporal ambiguity which enables present experience to transcend itself. In painting, one way this is achieved is through Impressionist abstraction where the historical specificities are blurred, creating visual space (so to speak) for the viewer to express their own historical prejudice and perceive continuity between their present World and some Past World. This Impressionist abstraction, I have suggested, might be understood as analogous to the Subject's perception which, through a selective existential engagement with the environment in which they live, accentuates certain aesthetic forms as historically significant.

I then focused on what I termed *vectors of historical experience*, certain qualities within the field of perception which act as vehicles for historical meanings to be carried forth from the Past to the Present World. Through an analysis of George's *Battle* and his own reflection of the significance of his work, I offered the example of the colour *red* as a means—specifically for George—of evoking a particular line of historical continuity between the traditional red jackets of British soldiers in the nineteenth century and contemporary British soldiers in Afghanistan.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ It might be the case that the artistic recognition of these vectors is in fact self-fulfilling; that George had the "historical experience" he describes because he sought, a priori, to attach "historical" meaning to his perception in the process of making the artwork, and not because the experience itself was historically evocative. George's case is used here simply as an example; I claim that his experience is indicative, and not representative.

Finally, I took a more holistic approach and considered how the whole field of perception, i.e., the scene, is fused with an historical horizon. I divided this discussion into two parts, focusing first on visual and then on prosaic imagery. For a visual example of this fusion, I considered Cook's *Argyle*. Here, I tried to show how the whole scene can be saturated with the perceived historical significance of a past war, namely, Vietnam. As such, this example illustrates how present perception "borrows" the aesthetic form from a mental image of a past war, assimilating both images in the production of the Present. I then considered a prosaic fusion, drawing on some passages from Bury's *Callsign Hades*. In this memoir, Bury reveals the power of language to convey the historical significance of war. I have shown, firstly, how language can frame an experience as historically significant; and secondly, how certain terms (such as "trudge") can act as vectors for historical meaning. Overall, therefore, this section has sought to analyse the historicity of perception; and, by implication, the historicity of the World which that perception is *perception of*. In concluding this section, I want to offer a couple of hermeneutic reflections about the historicity of experience.

This chapter as a whole, and this section on temporal horizons in particular, aims to demonstrate the sociological validity of the artwork by challenging the philosophical notion of representationalism. As a theory of art, representationalism implies that the artist experiences a re-presentation of the concrete manifold (i.e., they have a mental image), and that—in the case of painting—the artist's hand then re-presents that representation. As such, the artwork's ontological status is merely a copy of a copy; or rather, it is a copy of a copy of a copy, since the relation between "reality" and the artwork is mediated by the artist's mental image. The methodological insinuation of this underlying philosophical assumption is that the interpretative task is to unearth the "original" through an examination of the "copy". As I discussed above, there are several problems with this representationalist position; but most relevant here is the fact that it cannot understand the historicity of the artwork: The representationalist account would have to explain the historical signification of the artwork as either an objective quality of the scene itself, or as an expression of the artist's bias (a bias which is then understood as a methodological limitation to understanding the scene itself). Thus, the methodological agenda of disentangling objectivity from bias cannot understand the logics of historical meaning.

From a hermeneutic-phenomenological perspective, it becomes clear how this rigid dichotomy between "objectivity" and "bias" is limiting and misleading. That which is worth knowing (for the social scientist) about such experiences is not the properties of the objective environment which happened to surround the human animal, but the phenomenal meanings that those "objective properties" have for the human qua Subject. Rather than presenting a limitation, therefore, it is precisely the observer's (historical) prejudice which is the object of study. It is of course still the case that the artist may skew our understanding of the given experience based on their own idiosyncratic prejudice (and the interpretation of art should still attempt to account for such idiosyncrasies); but this should not lead

us to disregard such prejudice altogether. Indeed, from a Gadamerian hermeneutic perspective, “prejudice” should not be understood in the pejorative sense, but rather as a fundamental requirement for meaningful experience. As noted above, underneath all “direct observation” lay what Gadamer calls ‘unverifiable prejudices, presuppositions that have too great an influence over us for us to know about them’ (Gadamer 1960b, 297).¹⁰⁹ Thus, our original prejudice (in a phenomenological sense) is the fact of being *in* and *towards* the World. The methodological challenge for sociological understanding is then to grasp the manifestation of this essential prejudice. In this section, I have sought to understand these (historical) “prejudices” through the aesthetic frames which structure the British soldier’s experiences of war.

Gadamer offers a useful way to conceptualise these types of historical experiences: As discussed in Chapter 3, Gadamer describes the resulting historical experiences as a ‘fusion of horizons’ whereby the present horizons of experience is fused with some past horizon (Gadamer 1960b, 304; 367). The contemporary British soldier, for instance, fuses their experience of wading through water with the experience of the American soldier in Vietnam, the result being that their present “lived experience” transcends itself, reaching beyond its immediacy, and becomes continuous with some (imagined) historical Past. At a deeper phenomenological level, Gadamer draws on the Hegelian notion of sublation (*Aufhebung*), ‘the process by which the conflict between two opposed or contrasting things or ideas is resolved by the emergence of a new idea, which both preserves and transcends them’ (as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary). Effectively, the soldier’s lived and continuous experience is sublated into the Past, and from this assimilation emerges a new Present experience which is historically structured. For Gadamer, it is through this phenomenological process that “tradition” is constituted and established within a given institution (see discussion in Chapter 3 above).¹¹⁰

How much agency do individual social actors have over the way in which their atomised lives are sublated into a broader hermeneutic structure? Here, I want to propose a critique of Gadamer’s

¹⁰⁹ As such, understanding, for Gadamer, ‘is not merely a reproductive but always a productive activity’ (Gadamer 1960b, 296).

¹¹⁰ The question arises as to why the soldier would be inclined to sublate his present experience into an historical horizon: Why is the soldier *open* to historical experience; and why is the military institution so “traditional”? Explanatory factors would undoubtedly range from institutional forces (how the British military inculcates historical experience through various forms of cultivation/indoctrination), to existential proclivities (how the soldier, in particular, might be inclined to assimilate his own existence with a broader historical continuity). In the next chapter, where I consider narratives of death, I explore this second, existentialist, strand in more detail; I explore how the soldier’s sublation of his atomised existence serves to make the prospect of death less terrible, and how, relatedly, it can therefore facilitate self-sacrifice.

approach. In characterising individual experience as ‘effected and determined’ by the hermeneutic universe (Gadamer 1960b, xxx), Gadamer leaves too little room for agency and authenticity within his theoretical framework. It is true that, as social actors who have grown up in a particular society, the British soldier’s mind is furnished with a repertoire of aesthetic frames through which he can interpret his life; and that as he encounters new experience, he calls forth these frames and thereby sublates his experience into the Past. It would be taking this reasoning too far, however, to claim or imply that these frames are deterministic since they do not tell the soldier how they should be specifically applied. They lurk, rather, in the “hermeneutic universe” ready to be *taken up* by the nostalgic soldier seeking to assimilate his existence into some militarised ideal. Indeed, my analysis above suggests that this is the case.

Bury’s historical experience is a good example here. Bury clearly had, within the repository of his hermeneutic imagination, a scene of American soldiers wading through water with their weapons over their heads, being splashed in the face by rain. Bury also expresses a proclivity (in my view, a typical one) to situate his own experiences in relation to this hermeneutic “memory” of “Vietnam”. It should be clearly stated, however, that this aesthetic frame did not force itself into the Present (in some metaphysical way). Rather, it was beckoned forth by a social actor who was particularly inclined to adapt and exploit it in order to make sense of his own existence. The methodological focus, therefore, should not be on the frame itself but on the utility of that frame for the particular *Being* – and on why he would be inclined to sublate his own experience into that frame by “re-enacting” it.¹¹¹ In short, it is not sufficient that history is “handed down”; it must also be “taken up”.

5.5. The Locus of Meaning

A. Introduction

The previous two sections of this chapter have focused on the horizons of the contemporary British war scene. As a metaphor, the phenomenological notion of a “horizon” of perception is of course a spatial one: It evokes a conceptualisation of the World as geographically bounded. Even when these horizons are temporal (as I explored in the last section), there is still a sense in which the World is spatially delineated – namely, certain features of one’s environment are transfigured as historically significant, such that these features delineate the World of perception. My underlying phenomenological argument has been that the Subject exists, necessarily, *in* and *towards* a World, and that this World can be understood in this spatial/temporal sense.

¹¹¹ Here, I am drawing on Collingwood’s (1945, 282) notion of the “re-enactment” of history.

In this section, I want to draw on this spatial metaphor further, and explore the loci of meaning which are bounded by these horizons and which constitute the meaningfulness of the soldier's World. This distinction between *meaningful horizons* and *loci of meaning*, however, is an analytic one; and a word of phenomenological caution is necessary at the outset. In a strict phenomenological sense, this analytic distinction (between *horizon* and *loci*) is problematic. This is because experience itself does not offer such distinctions: We experience the World as a unity. Furthermore, as we saw in the last section, it often seems to be the case that the horizon is in fact what characterises and constitutes the meaningfulness of the experience itself (rather than merely "bounding" that experience). In this sense, the horizon seems to be the locus, since experience is directed directly *at* (and *is of*) the horizon. In this section, however, I cautiously proceed with this distinction; and I contend, moreover, that it can be methodologically useful to maintain. This is because it enables an analytic separation of *meaningful context* (delineated by horizons) from the focus of meaningful experience. It allows, we might say, a conceptualisation of the three-dimensionality of the meaningful World – rather than just understanding the Subject in relation to flat horizons, located at a static distance. Given this theoretical preamble, this section seeks to examine some of the loci which constitute the meaningfulness of the Afghan War Scene.

In particular, I focus on two loci of meaning, namely, the soldier's body (including his facial and bodily gesture) and the romanticised machine of war. There are many more loci of meaning in the contemporary British soldier's World, of course, but I want to suggest that these are two of the dominant themes which emerge. The facial and bodily gestures are significant, I suggest, because of the ego-centrism of modern war experience; and the machine is particularly significant because it has been effectively integrated into Romantic visions of warfare and that it encapsulates a fetishism with destructive technology. In-keeping with the general method, I analyse these loci of meaning through official war art. Overall, my intention is not to comprehensively describe the British soldier's World (which would require a more thorough empirical analysis). My aim, rather, is to elaborate a method through which the World of war (in this case, the Afghan War Scene) can be more fully theorised and examined, and to illustrate some of the logics through which the soldier constitutes his Self and World.

B. The body

In Chapter 3 (Section 3.3.D), I theorised the body as *the* condition for the possibility of ontology in general. The body makes phenomena—Objects, Selves, Others, Worlds—possible; and it is through the body that we examine those phenomena. As a phenomenon, therefore, I argued that War is necessarily embodied. It is through embodiment that the heritage of war is "taken up" and constituted as historically continuous. In Chapter 3, however, I was concerned with the body *phenomenologically* and *existentially*

– as a Being the fundamental possibility of which is to project and manifest its Self and its World. In this subsection, I consider the body as an Object or as an Other; I examine the visual effects of its projecting and manifesting its Self and its World. What can the surface of the body teach us about the significance of the World within which that body exists (and about the Self which exists in that World)? And how can war artists capture that significance?

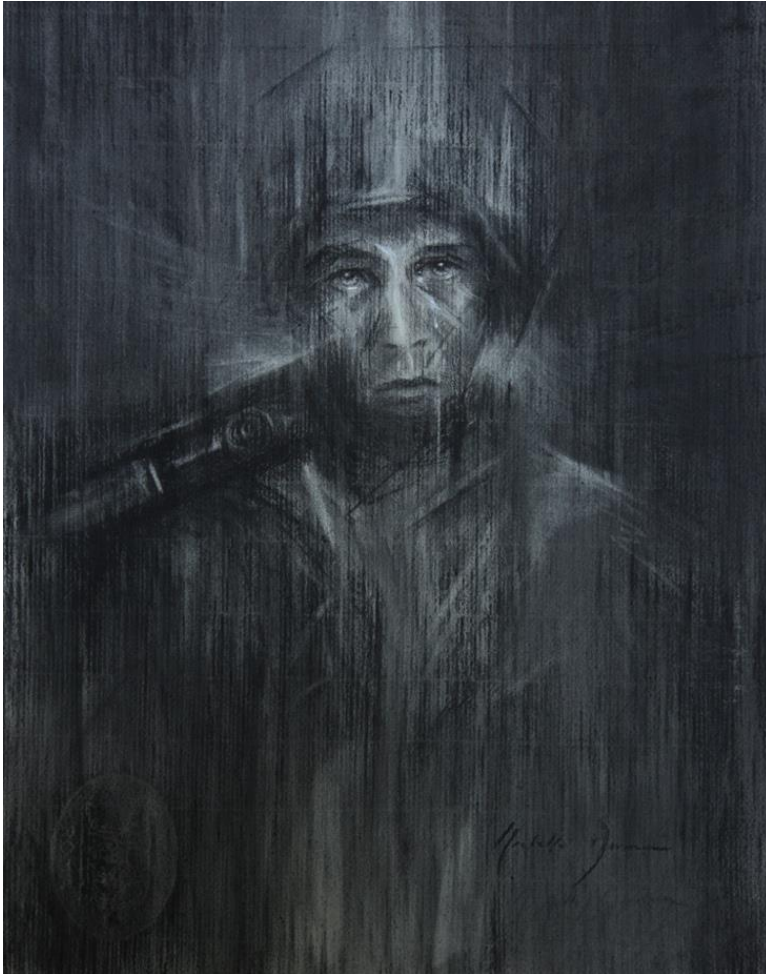
i. The facial expression

It is through the face that we express ourselves in our most succinct forms; and as such, the face is the purest manifestation of Being. To use a cosmological analogy, if the body is the entity around which the World revolves, then the face is often its core of gravitational force. The evocative surface of the soldier's face is captured well by British portrait artist, Arabella Dorman, who has served as an official British war artist both in Iraq and Afghanistan. 'As a portrait painter,' she writes,

what I'm really interested in is the psychological aspect of soldiering, and I've always been drawn to the ability of the still image to express human history, and I think nowhere is that more evident than actually in the faces of the soldiers, in their eyes, I think they tell a huge story' (Dorman, in *British Portrait Artist Conveys Images of War* 2009)¹¹²

Although she has extended the scope of her work, painting everything from romanticised landscapes of war to its 'quieter realities that lie behind the mainstream news' (Dorman, cited in George 2016b, 154), her most compelling work remains portraiture. A powerful example of Dorman's ability to capture the way in which the surface of the face encapsulates the experience of war is her (2009) *Through a Glass Darkly* (Figure 9). In this work, a British soldier stares at the viewer, seemingly beckoning the viewer to interpret the significance of his expression. The soldier stands casually, wearing a helmet and with a rifle resting on his shoulder. Since he appears to be in full battle dress, the viewer is presumably supposed to infer that he has recently returned from a patrol, and that on that patrol he has experienced something that—combined with his broader experiences of war—has led to the facial expression captured in this portrait. Of all the features, it seems to be the mouth, and above all the eyes, which convey the significance of what the soldier has seen. Indeed, it is the eyes—aided by an artistic abstraction, created by darkness which surrounds the soldier—that draw the viewer in and which, I would argue, constitute the merit of this work.

¹¹² Dorman's focus on the face as the locus of meaning is also consistent with how dead British soldiers are commemorated in public discourse (see, for example, King 2010, 11).



(Figure 9) Arabella Dorman, *Through a Glass Darkly*, 2009, Afghanistan.¹¹³

What message does this soldier's face convey? I want to argue that Dorman's *Through a Glass Darkly* effectively captures a special kind of disillusionment peculiar to modern Western war culture. Before proceeding with this claim it will be necessary to briefly distinguish between two types of disillusionment, one *positive* and one *negative*. In a positive sense (and it is this sense which I suggest Dorman's *Through a Glass Darkly* captures), disillusionment is a kind *epistemological enlightenment*. Disillusionment-as-epistemological-enlightenment is the most etymologically precise understanding of the term: *Disillusionment*, from *disillusion*, literally means 'To free from illusion; to disenchant, undeceive, disillusionize' (Oxford English Dictionary); in this conjugation, the 'illusion' from which one is being freed is 'The fact or condition of being deceived or deluded by appearances, or an instance of this; a mental state involving the attribution of reality to what is unreal; a false conception or idea; a deception, delusion, fancy' (Oxford English Dictionary). In this *positive* sense, the disillusioned soldier

¹¹³ Method not given on Dorman's personal website (<http://www.arabelladorman.com/work#/afghanistan>).

is the one who is no longer deceived, who has gone beneath appearances, and who has seen (witnessed) reality – a “reality” that *we*, as ignoble civilians who are protected by wise guardians, have not seen.¹¹⁴ This *positive* epistemological attitude should be distinguished from a *negative* notion of disillusionment, one which sees the soldier not as ultimately enlightened but as released from a particular set of *martial* illusions which arose in a given institutional culture. In this *negative* sense of disillusionment, the soldier was *illusioned* by a militaristic society/institution, and these illusions were then shattered by the *actual* experience of war.

Having established this distinction, we can ask which of these types of disillusionment is “represented” in Dorman’s *Through a Glass Darkly*? Are the eyes of the soldier the eyes of someone disappointed by their actual experiences, disgusted by the reality of war – the eyes of a *Being* rid of their false and mislead idealisations of war experience? Or are these eyes condescending, disdainful of our innocence, testifying that they have witnessed something that we have not, implicitly claiming that the soul which the eyes obscure is more enlightened than ours? I want to suggest the latter – that the soldier’s eyes in Dorman’s *Through a Glass Darkly* express the positive notion of disillusionment, and that the soldier effectively gazes at the artist/viewer in a condescending manner. The soldier’s condescension is not necessarily disdainful or contemptuous, but it is proud, expressing a superiority over the artist and viewer who have not experienced what he has experienced; it is a gaze that reproduces a common trope of war experience which says *I have witnessed a reality that you have not; and that only those who have witnessed can understand*. As artist, Dorman herself reproduces this modern Romantic sentiment when she suggests that ‘So many of them have seen things that [...] human beings shouldn’t have to see; I think you can read that in their eyes’ (*Arabella Dorman - War Artist* 2013).

These two notions of disillusionment, however, are not incommensurable: The *positive* notion might be what is asserted from the first person perspective of the soldier, while the third person observer (sociologist) might understand the soldier as disillusioned in the negative sense (indeed, it might be the case that the soldier is in fact disillusioned in the negative sense of war not living up to his idealised

¹¹⁴ Genealogically, I believe there is a Platonic ideal at the root of this positive notion of disillusionment. For Plato (as theorised in his *Republic*) the soldier is the “Guardian” of society; she or he is protector not only of society’s values, but of all Truth and Beauty. The Guardian is more noble than the civilians they protect because they are wiser, in the sense that they understand the True worth of the values being protected – i.e., they have glimpsed their Truth. Contemporary disillusionment war culture in the West, however, adapts this ideal by conceptualising battle as the site of enlightenment and the disclosure of truth; battle is therefore glorified as a transformative experience. My general understanding of disillusionment war culture is based on the work by Harari (2008, see also 2005). Through his longitudinal study of war memoirs (primarily in the European context), Harari shows how a disillusionment culture became one of the dominant narratives of modern war experience. The suggestion about the Platonic aspect of this culture is my own.

expectations, but that this realisation would pose an existential threat and so he seeks to preserve the myth of disillusionment in the form of enlightenment as a means of maintaining his identity as a soldier). By highlighting the positive dimension of disillusionment, however, I aim to reveal the way in which disillusionment is not so much an objective psychological state as a product of culture; in particular, it is a narrative ideal of modern (Western) warfare. “Disillusionment”, in this sense, is the end point of a cultural narrative; it is the final stage of the soldier’s journey which began with a naïve recruit/contemptible civilian, then underwent the semi-transformative experience of military training, was then “baptised” in combat, and then, after enough experiences of combat, eventually became “disillusioned” (i.e., enlightened).

It is therefore not paradoxical that the soldier aspires—in some subliminal existential sense—to become disillusioned. As we saw above (in the analysis of Bury’s *Callsign Hades*), Bury wanted to be able to “trudge” like his World War One forefathers did; perhaps he wanted to experience something of their misery so that he could be as entitled as they were to condemn war. This is not to say that there is not genuine sadness in the soldier’s eyes; the root of this sadness, however, is *Self-pity* – a *Self-pity*, moreover, which seeks to be pitiable so that the implicit claim to superiority can be acknowledged by others.¹¹⁵

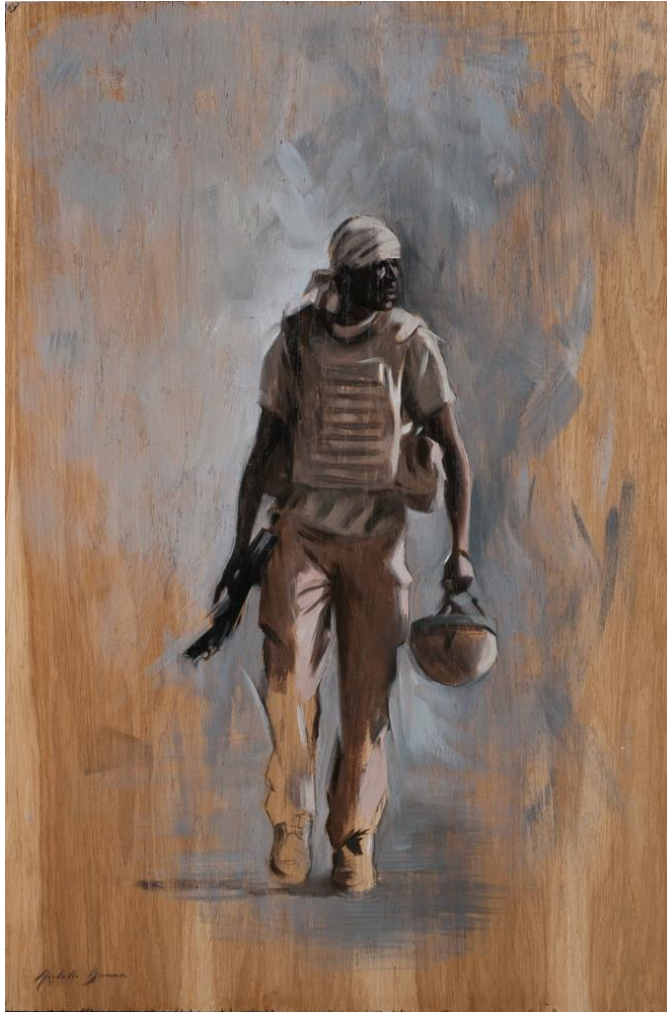
As Dorman’s *Through a Glass Darkly* shows, it is the surface of the soldier’s face—in this case, a particular play of white and black, of light and shadow—that evokes the cultural significance of

¹¹⁵ In her analysis of contemporary British war memoirs, Joanna Bourke aptly captures how disillusionment has been integrated into contemporary British war culture: ‘the trope of disillusionment that is so prevalent in First World War memoirs is largely absent – or, more accurately, disillusionment was part of what it meant to be a warfighter in the twenty-first century’ (Bourke 2016, 281). Where the ‘trope of disillusionment’ does occur, it does not repel the soldier-in-becoming; rather, it enchants him (as we saw with Bury “trudging” through mud, inspired by Wilfred Owen). As Bourke says, ‘there is a defiant ‘knowingness’ in these memoirs, which reverses earlier tropes of innocence turning bitter with disillusionment. In effect, these warfighters fused the ironic, filmic and literary trope with the heroic, twenty-first century ‘professional military’ one’ (Bourke 2016, 290). Thus, disillusionment has paradoxically been romanticised. With a broad sweep of the brush, this romanticisation of disillusionment can be seen in dominant representations of war in Western culture. In post-First World War Britain, for example, a narrative of disillusionment (in the sense of disenchantment with modernity) took hold (see, for example, Hynes (1990)). This disillusionment (which is epitomised in Owen’s *Dulce Et Decorum Est*), however, is starkly distinct from Rambo’s disillusionment in response to Vietnam: Rambo’s disillusionment is glorified in relation to a morally decadent society; and here we can see an emphasis on the moral superiority of the “soldier” over the “civilian” (as I suggested above, I think this is genealogically rooted in the Platonic notion of the soldier as a Guardian). To some extent, contemporary British warfighters have continued this trajectory and embraced the narrative ideal of disillusionment as what it means to have been to war.

“disillusionment” (as I have conceptualised it). If my interpretation is correct, then this facial expression is historically and culturally contingent: In the formation of his Self as a British Soldier, the individual has, in effect, mimicked and re-enacted pre-established notions of “disillusionment”. The *culture of disillusionment* has been “handed down” as the British heritage of war (epitomised, I suggested above, in Wilfred Owen’s *Dulce Et Decorum Est*); and the soldier embraces this narrative, embodying it and constituting it as a tradition of war. As is evident in *Figure 9*, this culture is manifest through the subtlest gestures – in this case, through the precise contractions of facial muscles. The face, as such, betrays our ontological potential and mirrors the World into which we project our Selves. Existentially, the face is the intersection between World and Self.

ii. Bodily gesture

Although the surface of the face is perhaps able to convey the most succinct bodily meanings, it is still only one part of a larger bodily gesture. The significance of the bodily gesture is clearly illustrated in another of Arabella Dorman’s works, *The Return, Sangin (Figure 10)*, in which a British soldier is captured casually walking, glancing over his shoulder. As the title suggests, the soldier is in Sangin, a notoriously dangerous district in Helmand Province where British troops had established a Forward Operating Base (FOB) and where some of the most intense fighting took place. The fact that the soldier is on the front lines is also indicated by his casual dress, especially the t-shirt and the bandanna, suggesting that he is away from the high military standards of dress and uniformity characteristic of rear echelon bases, such as Camp Bastion (indeed, the ability to take liberties with one’s dress is a way of demonstrating one’s proximity to the “front”, a place where other virtues, such as tactical abilities, trump smart appearances). The title also suggests that he has *returned*, presumably from a patrol, and his relaxed battle dress, with helmet and rifle in hand, suggests that he is already within the relative safety of the FOB. The surrounding context, however, is entirely abstracted, and the viewer is left only with the human posture, frozen in its movement.



(Figure 10) Arabella Dorman, *The Return*, Sangin, 2009, oil on pane.

What can Dorman's *Return* tell us about how the British soldier anticipates, experiences, and remembers war; and what does this soldier's body, in particular, convey? To my mind, Dorman's *Return* expresses a certain purposefulness, combined with a degree of resignation. The resignation is expressed in the soldier's unhurried indifference to the surrounding war: The soldier appears to have embraced his own vulnerability and his potential fate. Indeed, Dorman intended to capture this aspect, as indicated by an accompanying diary extract which, although slightly exaggerated, bears a relative truth: 'The omniscience of the hidden threat and the isolation of each and every soldier ... the feeling that every breath may be his last' (Dorman, cited in George 2016b, 161). Despite this resignation, however, it is, I believe, the purposefulness of the soldier's bodily expression which stands out. Nothing about the soldier's demeanour is accidental: The way he holds his weapon and helmet is consistent with the performance of the experienced soldier he seeks to be; his bandana is a throwback to Vietnam; and his regard is reminiscent of the soldier who claims to have experienced what we, the onlookers, have not.

Indeed, Dorman's soldier seems to be aware he is being watched, as if he is performing for the artist. This purposefulness is also captured in the confidence with which the soldier strides: His movement—which Dorman's still image does well to arrest—does not seem forced or reluctant, but willing and intentful. He comes across, as such, not as an ignorant pawn, compelled to carry out higher orders, but as someone who has embodied the broader societal posture of war. It is this wilful stride, in my view, which encapsulates the agency of the British soldier.

The fact that Dorman has chosen, in so much of her war art, to focus on the soldier's body and his facial expression is also telling (beyond the fact that she is primarily a portrait artist). Dorman's art epitomises the way in which contemporary British war is ego-centric. This ego-centrism is implicit in many of the other works I have considered. Michael Alford's *Op Herrick 18*, for instance, is a romanticisation of the British soldier's pilgrimage to the East; while Jules George's *Beyond the Wire* is a romanticisation of the soldier's courage to bound forth into the unknown. The message in such depictions, therefore, is not primarily political or ideological, but existential: It is about individual adventure. By focussing on the soldier's face and bodily gesture, Dorman captures the way in which such narratives are inscribed into the body.

To conclude this subsection: Through an analysis of two works by Arabella Dorman, I have examined how the surface of the body can express cultural meaning. First, I examined how the face can convey succinct but powerful and complex meanings; and second, I considered how the body, through its gesture, can express complex modes of being. What is remarkable about these works is that a flat, still, and considerably abstract image can convey such "depth". Yet this "depth" is manifest—paradoxically—on the surface of the body, just as it meets the eye of the social observer. As Merleau-Ponty says, 'Nothing is hidden behind these faces or these gestures [...]; there is but a touch of shadow that owes its existence to the light' (Merleau-Ponty 1945, lxxv). What is remarkable, phenomenologically, is that these meanings are clearly discernible. Through a play of light and shadow, Dorman discloses the perceptive quality of these culturally established aesthetic frames of war; and she discloses to us our ability as viewers to recognise them.

C. The romanticisation of the machine

Besides the glorification of the (common) soldier's body, the other entity which becomes particularly vested with significance in the contemporary British War Scene is the machine (the helicopter, armoured vehicle, etc). Indeed, in many of the artistic depictions of contemporary British war, the centre of focus is the soldier's figure and the machine – while everything else fades into abstraction (a prime example I have already considered, for example, is Jules George's *Beyond the Wire* (figure 3)). In this final subsection, I consider how the machine has been vested with significance (specifically, how it has

been romanticised). To do so, I consider one artwork which I believe is epitomises the broader genre of official war art in the contemporary British context.¹¹⁶

To better understand how the machine has been romanticised, it is useful to begin by situating the machine in a broader historical and aesthetic context (indeed, once the machine is contextualised in modern warfare, its romanticisation in the contemporary war scene appears paradoxical). Initially, it was in large part the machine (in the context of the accelerating industrialisation of warfare) which disenchanted the Western war scene. Industrialised war—the “storm of steel”, as Ernst Jünger called it—was too utilitarian, absurd, and grotesque to romanticise and beautify in the same way that nineteenth-century warfare had been. This changing aesthetic regard for war is captured succinctly in a remark made by Elizabeth Butler (whose beautification of charging cavalry at Waterloo has become an essentialised representation of that war): ‘the colour, the sparkle, the gallant plumage, the glittering of gold and silver,’ she commented, ‘have given way [in World War One] to universal grimness’ (Butler 1922, 325).

This grimness and absurdity is reflected in dominant aesthetic responses to warfare in the twentieth century: Although some artists, most notoriously the Italian Futurists, sought to glorify the destructive potential of the machine, it was the surrealist responses (epitomised in Picasso’s *Guernica*) which came to dominate the aesthetic consideration of the machine in war (and which still dominate the popular “memory” of early twentieth-century industrialised warfare today). Furthermore, this aesthetic response was not only a broader societal one. The machine also posed a challenge to martial virtues and threatened to disenchant the experience of war. Traditional martial virtues such as chivalry and honour largely gave way to utilitarian considerations of mass slaughter; the ordained cavalry horse gave way to the brutalist tank. Although these are sweeping generalisations, the main point is that aesthetic considerations of war shifted considerably in response to the industrialisation of war; and that the machine and its destructive capacity was at the heart of these shifting aesthetic responses.

Situated in this historical context, it is remarkable that the machine has come to be romanticised—and even fetishized—in the way it has within the contemporary British War Scene. Somehow, the brutalism of the destructive machine is no longer regarded as disgusting and disenchanting but as quaint and Romantic. This romanticisation of the machine is epitomised in James Hart Dyke’s *Grenadier Guards* (figure 12).¹¹⁷ At the centre of this image is a lightly armoured military

¹¹⁶ My reasoning in this section is inspired by Herf’s (1986) *Reactionary Modernism*.

¹¹⁷ Dyke has been an official war artist on “numerous” occasions, accompanying various regiments on operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Dyke’s corpus of military art more generally is indicative of how the soldier’s body, combined with the advanced machine, feature predominantly at the centre of the British war scene (see, for example, Dyke (2021)).

Land Rover vehicle with a soldier on top-cover manning a heavy machine gun. The vehicle is patrolling along a dirt track, surrounded by green pasture, towards the ruins of some mud-built compounds which occupy the centre middle ground. To the left, in the sky, a Chinook helicopter seems to be departing; and on the right, a plume of smoke erupting into the sky can be faintly made out (presumably caused by a bomb from an aircraft or heavy artillery).



(Figure 12) James Hart Dyke, *Grenadier Guards*, 2007, oil on canvas.

The composition of Dyke's *Grenadier Guards* is ambiguous, and perhaps even paradoxical. At first glance, the scene appears peaceful and quaint. This is due, I believe, to two features: Firstly, to the gentle pastel colours which initially greet the eye – to the greenness of the meadow, to the softness of the sandy track, and to the pinkish tinge to the haze in the sky; and secondly, it is due to the serene and pastoral setting as the viewer recognises the quaint ruins and the calm meadowland topped with white flowers. This initial perception, however, is contradicted once one realises that one is in fact witnessing a scene of battle. In lived experience, this scene would have been filled with violent noise: The Whop-Whoping from the departing Chinook on the left, the revving engines from the armoured vehicles, and the echo from the explosion on the right. The interpretation of this scene, therefore, presents the viewer

with a stark juxtaposition of seemingly incommensurable realities, one defined by tranquillity, and the other by violence.¹¹⁸

Is this ambiguity merely artistic folly, an error of representation arising from poor composition and a deficiency of technical abilities, or does it capture something essential about how the war scene was experienced by British soldiers? I want to suggest the latter – that Dyke has effectively captured a romanticising sentiment which dominates the contemporary perception of war in the British military. Dyke's *Grenadier Guards* should not be interpreted as would a photograph – as a snapshot of time and place (as such, it should not be considered “Realist” in the classic aesthetic sense of documenting “objective reality”). Rather, like Alford's Romantic images I considered above (e.g., *figure 1*), Dyke fuses present reality with the memory and anticipation of the War Scene to produce an image that is “representative” not of a still moment but rather of a disposition towards an *ideal* of war. My claim is not, of course, that this image, in its particular composition, is how each British soldier perceived the war scene (the imagination of each soldier produces its own idiosyncratic “prejudice”). My claim, rather, is that this image captures something general about the way in which the Afghan War Scene is romantically constituted by the British soldier. Technically, Dyke achieves this effect through certain forms of abstraction and compositional decisions. This technical ability, however, must be based on a deeper comprehension of the subjects he is commissioned to paint; in a phenomenological sense, this ability is based on an existential connection with the soldiers' World.

Dyke's *Grenadier Guards* is especially illustrative of the way in which brutal and violent machinery can be effectively integrated into the Romantic war-scape. While the machine was perceived to have disenchanted the early-industrial war scene, for the contemporary British war in Afghanistan it has been harmonised with the Romantic ideals of war. In the case of Dyke's *Grenadier Guards*, the machine's noise is drowned out by the silence of the pastel colours, and its destructive capacity is obscured by the mysterious haze which shrouds the landscape (making the explosion only faintly discernible). As in so much of the art produced by the official British war artists in Afghanistan, the violent potential of the machine is omitted from depictions. The machine is portrayed simply as a

¹¹⁸ Jules George, the artist I considered above, was acutely aware of, and seemingly motivated by, this contrast: ‘On the one hand, the vast and stunning landscapes, inhabited by seemingly ancient peoples wearing traditional costume, and on the other the sudden episodes of brutal violence conducted by the modern tools and machines of war’ (George 2016a, 36). Rather than posing a challenge to aesthetic comprehension, however, this contrast seems to excite the aesthetic sentiments of the artists; it poses an interesting challenge of how to integrate the brutal machine into the serene landscape. My claim, as I develop below, is that this aesthetic judgement is not merely the artist's imposition or a “corruption” of what is otherwise a violent scene, but is indicative of the British soldier's aesthetic sensibility.

necessary part of the materiality of war. It is less an instrument of misery and more a carriage for the Romantic/Orientalist adventure (as in the case of the Chinook in George's *Beyond the Wire*).¹¹⁹

In sum, I have suggested that the significance of the machine in the contemporary British War Scene is historically contingent, and perhaps even paradoxical. Initially considered antithetical to Romantic martial virtues, the machine has become a central vector of the mystery and Romance of contemporary British warfare. In the case of George's *Beyond the Wire*, the machine functions as the troops' carriage towards the unknown; while in Alford's *Op Herrick 18* and Dyke's *Grenadier Guards*, it is effectively incorporated—through artistic abstraction—into the Romantic landscape. Overall, these artworks give a sense of how the machine has become a dominant locus of meaning within the contemporary British War Scene.

5.6. Conclusion

In the previous chapter (Chapter 4), I conducted an ontology of the British soldier's subjectivity by exploring how he is materially, socially, and temporally constituted, both to his Self and to Others. I argued that subjectivity projects its Self through space and time, and that it may thereby be understood as ontologically "extended". As we saw in Chapter 3, however, Being—the phenomenological condition for the possibility of subjectivity—is necessarily *Being-in-the-World*, and this chapter has therefore sought to examine the World within which the subjectivity of the British soldier is constituted. I have sought to reconstruct in broad strokes the contours of the British-Afghan War Scene through an analysis of official British war art. This scene analysis has been premised on the phenomenological framework developed in Section 5.2. Here, I drew on Merleau-Ponty to argue that the Impressionist painting should not be understood as a representation, but rather as a depiction which has the potential to reveal the enigma of vision: In reconstituting the perceptible World, the Impressionist painting can reveal how aesthetic frames are used to transfigure brute reality into brute meaning. Drawing on Gadamer's hermeneutics, I then sought to establish the methodological connection between the artist and soldier and thereby constitute the sociological validity of this method used in this chapter. I

¹¹⁹ There is an interesting contrast between portrayals of the machine in war memoirs produced by British soldiers and war art produced by official war artists. While the latter, as I have shown, omit the violent capacity of the machine, there is a tendency in war memoirs to admire, and even fetishize, the machine's destructiveness. As Bourke observes: 'Unlike the canonical war memoirs of the two world wars, memoirs written in the context of the 'new military' of the twenty-first century praise, rather than abhor, the industrial might of the pre-eminent military powers. Every author is captivated by the technological sophistication of Allied forces and they often devote a significant proportion of their text to gloating over their unit's technical wizardry' (Bourke 2016, 280).

theorised an ideal of the artist as someone who accesses and transcribes the aesthetic frames which are constitutive of a given culture and which are largely taken for granted by the social actors who live in and through that culture. The artist, as such, potentially discloses the hermeneutic Truth of social existence. Thus, the viewer—including myself and the reader—is not entirely estranged from the World that the artwork depicts; and by drawing on the hermeneutic-phenomenological method, we can interpret the artwork and imaginatively participate in its cultural and existential significance.

Drawing on this theoretical basis, the rest of this chapter was divided into three empirical sections. Firstly, examining the spatial horizons of the World I suggested that two dominant themes emerge from official war art: On the one hand, “Afghanistan” is characterised as a Romantic Orient, and on the other as a mysteries adventure into the unknown. These spatial horizons provide a context for the soldier’s existence; they validate his acts *as* a soldier. Second, I examined the temporal (and specifically the historical) horizons of the soldier’s World. Here, I explored the soldier’s proclivity to assimilate his present “lived experience” into some broader historical understanding of what it means to be a (British) soldier. By “taking up” the heritage of war which is “handed down”, the soldier can sublate his Self within the broader significance of War and overcome the precariousness of his individuality. Various aesthetic techniques can illustrate how this is done in perception, and these techniques might be understood as analogous to how the “eye”, through the application of its “inward tapestries”, endows onto raw, “immediate” experience its historical prejudice. Finally, having delineated the war scene both spatially and temporally, I considered some of what I suggested to be the dominant entities which fill that scene – namely, the soldier’s body and the romanticised machine. In terms of the body, I showed how the body’s surface, including the facial expression and the bodily gesture, is able to manifest complex cultural meanings; and in terms of the machine, I discussed the paradox of how the (brutal) machine has been (romantically) integrated into and is constitutive of the contemporary British War Scene.

Throughout this chapter, I have focused on what the various artworks “say”, but another way the significance of these works can be grasped is by considering what these works omit. Specifically, there are several significant omissions which are perhaps indicative of how the British war in Afghanistan was embodied and constituted by British soldiers. The first glaring omission from this genre as a whole is violence and death. As I argued above, war is sanitised through Impressionist abstraction and pastel colours; and from these paintings we rarely get a sense of the violent velocity of the war. Relatedly, suffering is omitted: We see few, if any, of the war’s mutilated bodies – which stands in sharp contrast, for instance, to some of the grotesque art which emerged from the World Wars and Vietnam.¹²⁰ And

¹²⁰ This omission stands in contrast to first-hand accounts in memoirs, however, which tend to dwell on, or even fetishize, the mutilated body (for a summary, see Bourke (2016)).

where violence is depicted, such as Jules George's *Battle*, the scene is shrouded in smoke such that we cannot see its impact on the human bodies involved. As I have argued, however, this omission is not so much the artist's corruption of "reality", but an indication of how the Afghan War Scene is romanticised.

Another glaring omission is politics. Although, in some sense, all art is political, contemporary official British war art tends to intentionally avoid political themes. In contrast to art from other periods, there is no glorification of the nation or the military institution; neither is there any explicit indication of ideological themes. Related to this omission of politics is the absence of any contentious moral issues. Official British war artists tend to both glorify and trivialise war experience. They glorify it in an epistemic sense of adventure and self-enlightenment, and they trivialise it by characterising it (in an ego-centric way) as a Romantic pilgrimage and an experience of self-discovery and self-expression. In this moral simplicity, contemporary British war art lacks the glorified moral ideals of classical Romantic artworks, the moral outrage epitomised in works such as Goya's *The Disasters of War*, as well as the moral depravity captured by artists such as Otto Dix. From this omission, I believe, we can infer something about the typical moral sensibility of the British soldier and the way war experience was generally framed and embodied.

This broader hermeneutic consideration of official British war art demonstrates how *selective* perception is, and how the World we experience and constitutively "see" is contingent on the expectations and anticipations we have about that World (and ultimately, on how we project the World into *Being*). In his official artistic statement (part of which I cited above), former British soldier and Impressionist painter Michael Alford gives us an indication of how selectiveness functions in the production of the work of art:

The process [of painting] often involves cutting out visual distractions and transient effects so that the resulting image has more power. Time acts as an important filter for me and so does physical distance between the initial sketch and the painting. Both help me distil the memory and pick out the essential forms. My overall aim is to communicate my experience of seeing, to convey—through the use of light and shadow and mood—some of the magic and mystery I feel when I look at the world (Alford 2021)

This process, I want to suggest, is in some sense analogous to how the soldier experiences a given war: Subjects do not see an "objective reality" which they then convert into a phenomenal World; rather, they perceive the phenomenal World directly, their sight already "distilled" into the essential (cultural and historical) aesthetic forms which structure experience. The artwork, therefore, does not just give us an indication of how the British war was experienced by the soldiers. In an analogous sense, the artist's "agile hand" can reveal how the eye of the soldier transfigures what lay before it into a meaningful

reality – *a Reality* which explains and makes sense of their fervent and violent action in the World the artists depict. Through projecting outwards his “inward tapestries”, the soldier creates a space in which he can be a soldier. *Subjectivity* and *World*, as such, stand in a mutually constitutive dialectic.

6. Death: The Final Rendezvous

the bounding of our existence by death is always decisive for our understanding and assessment of
life

(Wilhelm Dilthey, cited in Heidegger 1927, 494, note vi)



(Figure 13) Jules George, *Repatriation Ceremony*, 2010, ink on paper.¹²¹

6.1. Introduction

In the previous two chapters, I focused on *describing* the British soldier's *Being-in-the-World*. In Chapter 4, I offered a phenomenological interpretation of Parker's (2016) *Anatomy of a Soldier* and argued that this text reveals how the soldier is existentially constituted as a subjectivity in relation to material and social entities. In Chapter 5, I then explored the broader Worldly milieu in which this projection of Self takes place, and I argued that the World should be understood as bounded by temporal and spatial horizons. As such, these two chapters have theorised and empirically illustrated how the British soldier's Self and World are manifest in existence. In this current chapter, I seek to complement this understanding of the soldier's *Being-in-the-World* by considering how the prospect of death circles

¹²¹ This drawing, which depicts British soldiers commemorating their comrades who "fell" in Afghanistan, is taken from George (2016b, 47).

back to structure Self and World. I begin with the observation that the prospect of death is existentially significant yet also paradoxical: On the one hand, death is—as the epigraph drawing above (*figure 13*) illustrates—a significant and constitutive feature of the soldier’s World and a central feature of their aesthetic frame of war. On the other hand, however, death is also a dreadful and unfathomable prospect and is ultimately that which threatens to make the Self and World an impossibility by annihilating the condition for their existence (i.e., the human body). How can these existential extremes be reconciled; and why do soldiers embody a prospect which threatens their non-existence? Ultimately, what is the significance of “death” in relation to the soldier’s World and Self?

To answer these questions, I draw on Heidegger’s notion of *Being-towards-death*. As the above epigraph suggests, the idea that “life” and “death” are *hermeneutically* interwoven goes back to Wilhelm Dilthey.¹²² For Heidegger, however, Dilthey did not go far enough; stuck within a narrow hermeneutic framework, he did not consider the ontological (phenomenological-existential) significance of death.¹²³ Drawing on Kierkegaard, Heidegger conceptualises death as the uttermost possibility of life. Always impending, death is a dreadful and anxiety-provoking prospect which causes us to “flee” into the World. Thus, although many have theorised the significance of the (dreadful) prospect of death¹²⁴, Heidegger is unique in showing how this prospect *effects* (constitutes the existence of) the Self and World. As is encapsulated in his famous phrase *Being-towards-death* (used synonymously with *Being-towards-the-end*), Heidegger shows how the prospect of death underpins all existence. Within this theoretical framework, this chapter explores how the prospect of death for the soldier relates to the act of constitutively embodying war.

The overarching argument is that the soldier’s Self and World—as described in the previous chapters—is paradoxically validated by the prospect of death; and that by analysing this prospect, a better understanding of the Soldier’s *Being-in-the-World* can be achieved. I begin (in section 6.2) by conceptualising “death” in an existential sense as non-existence. In this sense, death is absurd and anxiety-provoking. Here, I theorise the soldier as “fleeing” from existential death *into-the-World*; and the World, as such, is conceptualised as a “refuge” (an existential logic which explains its

¹²² Dilthey’s innovative contribution here is to theorise “life” *hermeneutically*. “Life”, as such, is not a sum of isolated experiences but a structural whole; and “death”, by implication, acquires a hermeneutic significance in relation to “life” thus understood.

¹²³ See, for example, Heidegger (1927, 72 [46]). For an overview, see White (2005, 70). For a critical analysis of the relation between Dilthey, Husserl, and Heidegger, see Caputo (1984).

¹²⁴ I have also drawn on Becker’s (1973) *The Denial of Death* – although Becker takes a psychoanalytic/evolutionary approach, and does not theorise the existential relationship between Death, Self, and World.

phenomenological occurrence as the soldier's dwelling place). "Death" then becomes something that happens *in-the-World*. In section 6.3, I then explore what becomes of this Worldly "death". I show that death is—for the most part—naïvely understood by the soldier as something that happens only to the Other. I then explore the significance of the death of the Other, and argue that this can have the (paradoxical) effect of validating the soldier's World and Self. In the final section (6.4), I explore the linguistic significance of death for the British soldier. Specifically, I examine how death is disguised in abstractions and metaphors within contemporary British military culture. Together, these sections explore the significances of death ranging from the most existential and unfathomable to the most Worldly and culturally perverted.

This chapter relies on several methods and sources, including: My own (autoethnographic) perspective, interviews with soldiers and veterans, memoir analysis, journalistic reportage, and official obituaries published by the British government. Before explaining each of these methods/sources in more detail, I want to first clarify the methodological purpose of this chapter. This chapter is primarily an attempt to develop an existentialist-phenomenological theory to understand the significance of death for the (British) soldier. As such, my aim is primarily theory-building, and I do not offer a comprehensive analysis of any of the respective sources of data mobilised below. I present data from the respective sources, therefore, not in an attempt to claim that what the data "suggests" or "says" is representative of the genre, but to highlight and illustrate certain phenomena which I propose are theoretically relevant in understanding the prospect of death within the soldier's lifeworld. Thus, while some of the propositions offered below are more empirically grounded, others are far more speculative. Overall, my aim is to marshal data where available to *make sense* of the paradoxical significance of death; and in the absence of existing studies in this regard, the most this chapter can offer is some preliminary theoretical propositions which might be "tested" in a more thorough empirical analysis.

To elaborate on the methods and sources used, it will be useful to contextualise them within the methodological processes through which the arguments were developed (although the process was not as linear as any description implies). In accordance with the discussion in the Introduction about my autoethnographic involvement in this thesis, the arguments of this chapter originated in a personal conviction that there is something deeply significant yet paradoxical about the prospect of death for the soldier (that death is at once constitutive of the soldier's existence yet also constantly threatening to annihilate that existence). This intuition was then filtered/mediated through several in-depth interviews I conducted with veterans and currently serving soldiers.¹²⁵ Alongside these interviews, I have also read

¹²⁵ Citations in this chapter to "anonymous soldier; interviewee" are drawn from five interviews with separate soldiers. All interviewees were recruited from my personal contacts from my own military service. In terms of the nature of the sample: All interviewees are either currently serving or former members of the British Royal

several war memoirs and novels written by former soldiers. Here, my focus has been on accounts written by front line combat soldiers.¹²⁶ Data from these sources is presented below in an *illustrative* manner in order to explore the validity of certain theoretical propositions. Finally, in Section (6.4) below, where I explore the linguistic significance of death for the British soldier, I rely predominantly on an analysis of official government obituaries. During the War in Afghanistan, the British government established a practice of publishing on its website obituary comments by senior officers, comrades, and family each time British forces personnel died.¹²⁷ These obituaries have already gained initial academic attention,¹²⁸ and I build on some observations already made to offer some propositions about the existential significance of death for the British soldier.

Marines; all fought on the front lines in Afghanistan at least once between 2006 and 2021; and all began their careers as non-commissioned officers (and one subsequently acquired a commission). My guiding epistemological assumption when conducting the interviews was that any interview is inherently *dialogical*: Rather than positioning myself as impartial interviewer and the “subject” as interviewee, I found it important to acknowledge my own involvement in the data produced – that any answer given is fundamentally contingent not only on the question asked but also on the overall framing of the interview and the personal relationship I had with the interviewee.

¹²⁶ The genre of war memoirs by British soldiers in the context of the War in Afghanistan is large and expanding. For an overview (until 2010), see Kleinreesink (2016); see also Woodward and Jenkins (2012, 2016a), Bourke (2016). For this chapter, I have drawn on two memoirs in particular: Mark Ormrod’s (2009) *Man Down*, and Patrick Bury’s (2010) *Callsign Hades*. I have also drawn on Harry Parker’s (2016) *Anatomy of a Soldier*.

¹²⁷ The total number of British service personnel who died between the start of operations in October 2001 and 23 July 2015 was 454. Of this total, ‘405 were killed as a result of hostile action’ (British government 2021u) and on my count approximately 300 were front line combat troops belonging to various infantry regiments. Although I have read and qualitatively analysed a broader sample, for the analysis below—and for the sake of parsimony and feasibility—I focus on a sample of all the Royal Marines who are included on the website, of which there are 60. Across this sample, the obituary length varies considerably but the average is over 1,900 words. My analysis is primarily qualitative, based on my primary reading of each of these obituaries; but where appropriate, I also offer a quantitative perspective of word frequency in order to provide context. I should also note that this focus on obituaries to Royal Marines entails certain limitations. Specifically, there are micro-cultures within each regiment of the British military, and without a comparative analysis (which is beyond the remit of this chapter), it would be difficult to generalise to the “British soldier” in general. For an insightful outline of the micro-culture of the Royal Marines, see, for example, King (2004).

¹²⁸ See Zehfuss (2009) and King (2010). For more recent and broader analyses, see Danilova (2015), Frisk (2018), and Tidy (2021). These works, which focus on examining and theorising the discursive trends of the obituaries and situating these discourses within broader (militarised) society, do not directly consider the significance of “death” for the soldier and the effect this has for the soldier’s motivation/participation in war.

6.2. “Fleeing” from death into-the-world

In the previous chapter, I described and delineated—both spatially and temporally—the British soldier’s “World” in Afghanistan and I conceptualised this World as the *Afghan War Scene*. The description of this World alone, however, does not explain how the British soldier ends up “in” this World: Why was this World a *World-for-him*? Drawing on Heidegger, I argue in this section that the prospect of death (in the existential sense of non-existence) is, for the soldier—like for any social actor—unfathomable, and that for most part it presents an unbearable form of anxiety. The soldier can then be understood as “fleeing” into-the-World from this unbearable prospect; and the World, in turn, can be understood as a “refuge” from the prospect of non-existence – it is a “dwelling” place among Everyday occurrences where “death” (as we see in the following sections) can be socially harnessed and its absurdity and dreadfulness can be obscured within social institutions. “Death”, as such, becomes an explanatory factor of the World’s existence and of the soldier’s *Being-in-that-World*.¹²⁹

First, it is necessary to consider, in the broadest (existentialist) terms, what death means for the soldier. One might assume that soldiers fighting in war had pondered the prospect of their own non-existence more than the average citizen; and one might further assume—along with those who romanticise war—that this pondering had resulted in a heightened understanding of the significance of death (and therefore of life). Yet, rather than resulting in a heightened wisdom about the nature of existence, the impending presence of death in war seems simply to bring death’s essential unfathomability to the fore. A sniper in the Parachute Regiment who was deployed to the violent epicentre of Sangin in Southern Afghanistan in 2006, for example, succinctly expresses his inability to comprehend the death of his friend who died when a mortar round landed in their compound: ‘It doesn’t make any sense, how can you be talking to someone ten minutes earlier and then later on you find out you’ll never talk to them again’ (ITV News 2021a). This testimony, which captures the sheer senselessness of death, is representative of many that I have come across in the course of this research. In this case, even the sniper—whose role more than most in the military is to bring about death—finds the state of non-existence incomprehensible – undermining the Romantic cliché of Modern war experience that there is something to learn (existentially) through a proximity to death and dying.

¹²⁹ “Fleeing” is a term Heidegger uses frequently in *Being and Time* (Heidegger 1927). Elsewhere, Heidegger (1951) speaks of Being as “dwelling”, referring specifically to the way in which we “dwell” in language – a theme which will be relevant below. Describing the World as a “refuge” is my addition.

If the state of *no-longer-Being-there* (to use Heidegger's term to describe existential death) is absurd and uncanny, then so is the process and experience of dying. The most compelling account of dying I have come across in the course of this research is Harry Parker's fictional description of the experience of an innocent bystander being blown up in Afghanistan by a bomb dropped from an aircraft (and I suggest in Chapter 4 that this account is based on Parker's own experience of being blown up). Parker describes how

In a flash [after a bomb lands on the building in which he stands], his existence became a dot, deprived of anything physical, and he couldn't comprehend the extent of his body as his consciousness churned over, folding on itself, and slammed into a final moment (Parker 2016, 221)

Of course, we should not mistake this literary effort for an actual experience of death in the existential sense: Parker, who penned the passage, still *exists* and has no authority to speak of non-existence. Rather than offering profound insights into the nature of death, such passages primarily reveal the limitations of language to capture the experience of dying – leaving us with only poetic speculation. The limitation of the best of linguistic struggles to capture the meaning of death itself reveals how ineffable and unfathomable the prospect of non-existence really is.¹³⁰ As we explore below, however, such passages do give an indication of the *significance* of death (i.e., as a prospect in relation to life).

¹³⁰ What such passages might do, however, is recount a “proximity” to death and describe the experience of losing consciousness in the event, for example, of one's heart stopping (as Parker's did several times). This highlights the need to clarify my usage of the term “death”: In common usage, “death” is ambiguous and can refer to both the ‘*act or fact of dying*’, as well as to the ‘*state or condition of being without life*’ (Oxford English Dictionary; my emphasis). Presumably, of course, the former leads necessarily and eventually to the latter (i.e., the act of dying leads eventually to the state of death), yet this also depends on how “death” is understood. If death is defined in a physiological sense as the loss of vital function, then it might reasonably be claimed that *dying*—to some extent—can be experienced (such as during cardiac arrest), and that “death” (in this sense) can therefore be “approximated” – hence the notion of “near-death experiences” (Moody 1975). If, however, death is understood in an existentialist sense of non-being, or non-existence, then it clearly cannot be experienced. As Evan Thompson writes, ‘my own death is ungraspable [because] there is no object “my own death” that one can mentally grasp, precisely because there's no subject for whom this can be an object’ (Thompson 2014, 315). In Heidegger's terms: ‘Dasein does not, proximally and for the most part, have any explicit or even any theoretical knowledge of the fact that it has been delivered over to its death’ (Heidegger 1927, 295 [251]). In this existentialist sense, death remains an absurd and uncanny prospect which looms over all existence; and as we see below, the *significance* of “death” belongs not to the dead but to those who are left behind *in-the-World*.

For Heidegger, the absurdity and unfathomableness of (existential) death presents us with an unbearable anxiety. In order to make this argument, Heidegger makes a sharp distinction between “fear”, which he conceptualises as a Worldly experience (we fear things in-the-world), and “anxiety”, which is an indefinite malaise or dread about the prospect of non-existence – of not having a world at all, or of *no-longer-being-in-the-world* (Heidegger 1927, 227, note 1; 230 [186]). (In the following section, I will explore how, and to what extent, death is “feared” by the soldier; while this section focuses on the general anxiety provoked by existential death and its explanatory value.) According to Heidegger, anxiety is a basic state of existence: ‘That in the face of which one has anxiety [...] is Being-in-the-world as such’ (Heidegger 1927, 230 [186]). The mere fact of existence, and the necessarily entailed possibility of non-existence (since we must eventually die), causes anxiety (Cf., Becker 1973). According to Heidegger, most of us most of the time find this anxiety—this prospect of not-being—mostly unbearable, and so we “flee” from it into the World. This anxiety, however, is necessarily experienced from within the World itself, and so being-in-the-world is described as being in a state of constantly “fleeing”. The absurd and ironic paradox of being a soldier, as we will see below, is that the World into which the soldier flees is one in which death is considerably more likely.¹³¹

In the face of existential anxiety, the World becomes a sort of “refuge”. By being utterly ‘absorbed in the “world” of its concern’, to use Heidegger’s (1927, 295 [252]) terms, the soldier can escape the impending inevitability of his own non-existence (paradoxically, the ultimate “escape” from existential death is to die *in-the-World* – a logic which might explain self-sacrifice). The World’s temporal and spatial horizons (as described in the previous chapter) give the soldier something concrete to clutch onto, a grounding which can distract him from his essential finitude.

For Heidegger, this “covering up” of death and our taking flight into-the-World is not an individual endeavour, but rather a collective one that we—members of the same social groups—orchestrate together. Thus, the everyday World into which we flee is essentially a social place: We lose and abandon ourselves in what Heidegger calls the “They” – that is, we forgo our ‘ownmost’ and authentic existential individuality, and immerse ourselves in a culture, a history, and a set of social institutions.¹³² The “They” provides ‘a *constant tranquilization about death*’; it ‘concerns itself with transforming [...] anxiety into fear in the face of an oncoming event’, and then passing off ‘the anxiety

¹³¹ Heidegger writes that our ‘everyday fleeing’ ‘shows phenomenally that anxiety, as a basic state-of-mind, belongs to Dasein’s essential state of Being-in-the-world’; as such, ‘anxiety is always latent in Being-in-the-world’ (Heidegger 1927, 189 [134]). The notion of “fleeing” into-the-world is of course metaphorical; other metaphors Heidegger uses to describe our state of being-in-the-World include “falling”, “thrownness”, “being-lost”, “being absorbed”, and “abandoning oneself” (e.g., Heidegger 1927, 220 [175-176]).

¹³² See also Chapter 3, Section (3.3.C), where I theorise the social essence of war a *Being-against*.

which has been made ambiguous as fear [...] as a weakness with which no self-assured Dasein may have any acquaintance' (Heidegger 1927, 293-294 [250], original emphasis). Together, thus, we deceive ourselves about our inevitable and always-impending fate.¹³³

Although Heidegger is speaking more generally, the appropriateness of this aspect of his theorising for an analysis of the military institution is striking. The military institution is explicitly concerned with dispelling the anxiety which soldiers, as existential beings, are naturally inclined to experience – an anxiety which would undermine their will to fight.¹³⁴ Perhaps more than any other social institution, the military must therefore create an overarching “They” into which each individual is subsumed. The outcome is that the military institution (to use Heidegger’s words) ‘covers up what is peculiar in death’s certainty—that it is possible at any moment’ (Heidegger 1927, 302 [258]). It encourages a depreciation of the significance of death. Indeed, warrior ethos’ of all sorts are primarily concerned with banishing the fear of death; “death” is first converted into a Worldly affair, the fear of which is then characterised as cowardly and selfish.

This Heideggerian understanding of the social structure of Being can make better sense of the phenomenon of self-sacrifice. From an analytic and individualist perspective, self-sacrifice seems entirely paradoxical since each individual, as an autonomous entity, should ultimately be preoccupied with its own survival. Such a perspective, however, misunderstands the nature of “self” which is being sacrificed. Once it is understood that this “self”, as a *Being*, exists in a worldly context in which its very *Being* is existentially bound up with a group and a culture and that its “individuality” has already been abandoned by fleeing into the “They”, then “self”-sacrifice comes to mean a very different thing. In the previous chapter, I discussed how the “individual” *sublates* their atomised existence into a broader historical horizon, thereby achieving an existential grounding not otherwise entailed in the precarity of lived and organic time.¹³⁵ This existential process can also be understood from a social perspective: By sublating his “authentic” Self into the “They” of the military institution, the soldier diminishes the dreadfulness of death by relinquishing the existential precarity of “individuality”. Carried to its “logical” (and absurd and ironic) extreme, the ultimate act of sublation in this context then becomes to

¹³³ In a passage that summarises some of the key implications of his theory of death, Heidegger writes: ‘It is already a matter of public acceptance that “thinking about death” is a cowardly fear, a sign of insecurity on the part of Dasein, and a sombre way of fleeing from the world. *The “they” does not permit us the courage for anxiety in the face of death*’ (Heidegger 1927, 298 [254], original emphasis).

¹³⁴ In her *An Intimate History of Killing*, Joanna Bourke (1999) documents the institutional processes and developments within Western (primarily Anglo) militaries throughout the second half of the twentieth-century to overcome the fear of death and enable soldiers to kill (and die). See also Grossman (1995).

¹³⁵ See Chapter 5, Section (5.4.E) above.

die in service of the “They” – to transcend organic matter by handing one’s Self over entirely in becoming exclusively the *ideal* of one’s organic Self.¹³⁶

In conclusion: This section has explored some of the relevant nuances of what Heidegger means by his term *Being-towards-death*: We are beings who, for the most part, are “inauthentic” social actors who have “fled” from death, and “fallen” into the everyday World – a World in which we have become “absorbed”, “lost ourselves”, and with which we are therefore “primordially familiar” (Heidegger 1927, 119 [86]). As such, our Worldly existence (including our experience and behaviour) is fundamentally *effected* (conditioned and determined) by the prospect of death. “Death”, in this existential sense, is always ‘*something that stands before us—something impending*’ (Heidegger 1927, 294 [250], original emphasis); it is that possibility which—however much social institutions try to conceal it—is always still outstanding; it is the “‘end’ of Being-in-the-world” (Heidegger 1927, 276-277 [234]). In the precarious interim, however, the World is our “refuge”, our “dwelling” place in which we “cover up” this inevitable prospect. Having explained how death brings forth the World, in the next two sections I explore what becomes of “death” once it is brought down to earth, so to speak – once it is perverted by the “They”.

6.3. The significance of Worldly death

In-the-World, “death” becomes an institution, a culture, and is defined by members of the social group. As such, death and dying become a social activity which are socially experienced, commemorated, and remembered according to social norms. This section explores how death is *instituted* within the British military institution (broadly conceived to include the broader culture of militarism in British society). I do this in three steps: First, I explore the significance of a tendency, especially among younger soldiers, to banish the prospect of Worldly death from *My World* – such that death will never happen to *Me*, but only to the Other. Second, I consider how even the (Worldly) death of the Other remains incomprehensible as we glimpse the existential prospect of our own non-existence. Third, I explore how witnessing the death of the Other can—far from disenchanting and undermining our Worldview—paradoxically precipitate a reinvigorated validation of the World. My aim is not to demonstrate that these existential sentiments are representative of how British soldiers in general exist *in* and *towards*

¹³⁶ This hermeneutic-phenomenological theorisation of self-sacrifice overlaps with Harvey Whitehouse’s anthropological-psychological theory of “identity fusion”; see, for example, Whitehouse (2018; Cf., Whitehouse et al. 2014; Swann et al. 2009).

the World, but rather to offer a preliminary sketch of a set of existential logics which can make sense of the soldier's peculiar acts of embodying war.

Young soldiers seem to have a frivolous attitude towards death – perhaps resulting from a combination of being young and of the military institution harnessing the existential naïveté that youth brings.¹³⁷ The sense of immortality is captured tragically by one mother, recounting the moment when she said goodbye to her son who would soon die in Afghanistan: ‘When we were saying goodbye at Brize Norton [the main British military airport used to transport troops to Afghanistan], when he was going onto the flight there, I held onto him and I did say to him I don't think I'm gonna see you again; and he said, Stop worrying Mum, I'm invincible’ (ITV News 2021b). This sense of immortality, that *It will never happen to me*, is frequently expressed by wounded veterans. In *Anatomy of a Soldier*, for example, Harry Parker (who himself lost two legs in Afghanistan) frequently writes of his wounded protagonist that ‘it was never going to happen to him, he was meant to be lucky’ (Parker 2016, 262). Even strewn wounded on the ground, his protagonist asserts in vain that ‘It was never going to happen to you and now you would stand up and dust yourself off. This happens to others, you managed to think, but the pain started to build and you couldn't move’ (Parker 2016, 302). Indeed, since each thinks that They themselves are *meant to be* lucky while the Other is unlucky, some have documented an embarrassment when it happens to Them. Mark Ormrod, an injured veteran who, besides other injuries, lost two legs and one arm when he stepped on a mine in Afghanistan, writes about the first thoughts running through his mind as he lay wounded on the ground:

My first feeling wasn't fear or pain, it was anger at myself. I just felt stupid and embarrassed. “You're a Marine,” I thought. “You're supposed to be one of the most professionally trained soldiers on the planet. What a prick! What a fucking idiot! How could you do something so stupid?” (Ormrod 2009, 17)

When one's self-esteem is hinged to a sense of vocational professionalism and existential invincibility, being injured or killed is simply embarrassing – an indication of how *Worldly* and deprived of its existential significance bodily destruction and death can become.

This sense of immortality is linked to a lack of seriousness about death – a sense that, like on military exercises, in video-games, or in play-soldiers, everyone comes back to life at the end. In his

¹³⁷ This (youthful) attitude which regards death as frivolous is a theme which has emerged throughout the interviews with soldiers I have conducted for this research; it is expressed succinctly, for example, by the anonymous interviewees cited in the following pages. The correlation of youthfulness and willingness to enact violence in the name of a group and to die for that group is also supported by data in criminology and terrorism studies (for an overview, see Rosenzweig, Ruisch, and Stern 2018).

war memoir, *Callsign Hades*, Patrick Bury (2010) captures well the existential naïveté which is typical of the young soldier. Describing his experience of visiting Brookwood Military Cemetery during his military training after his military ‘masters had rightly determined that the real cost of war needed to be hammered home to [them]’, he recounts how it was meant to

awaken us to the ultimate sacrifice our chosen profession could call on us to make. And yet as I whirled away my time through the rows and rows of flagstones, looking for anyone with the same name as me, or, when that failed, anyone from an Irish regiment or even Ireland, death still seemed distant, cool, still part of the game that was Sandhurst and training with blanks. War was clean, fun. Everyone came back to life at the end (Bury 2010, 5)

This sense that war is a game persists even on live operations. In one of his poems, for example, former British colonel-come-wounded-veteran-come-artist, Stuart Hill, remembers how ‘we dived for cover on those oft occasions the bombs exploded the peace around us, and we laughed if we had no injury’ (Hill 2021).¹³⁸ Indeed, even when death is witnessed directly, the sense of frivolity can remain. One interviewee, for example, remembers how

As soon as I was out of the danger [...] we can have a laugh and a joke about it. *We were joking about it!* [...] We had just literally stepped over the body of someone we knew, who’s dead, and we were like, *Fucking hell that was mental, crazy* [...] I’ve always assumed that was the British way [...] we always managed to take the piss out of stuff that scared us [...] (anonymous soldier; interviewee)

From a variety of sources, these testimonies exemplify how the (young) soldier trivialises death and how they tend to find the prospect of their own death inconceivable.

According to Heidegger, this attitude is not necessarily unique to youth nor to the military (nor to Britishness, as the interviewee above suggests) but is rather characteristic of a basic state of *Being-in-the-world*. In everyday public life, Heidegger observes, one ‘talks of [death] in a “figurative” manner, either expressly or else in a way which is mostly inhibited, as if to say, “One of these days one will die too, in the end; but right now it has nothing to do with us”’ (Heidegger 1927, 297 [253]). It ‘is said that “one dies”’, Heidegger continues, ‘because everyone else and oneself can talk himself into saying that “in no case is it I myself”, for this “one” is the “nobody”’ (Heidegger 1927, 297 [253]). As such, one’s own death is effectively and indefinitely deferred until later (Heidegger 1927, 302 [258]). Thus,

¹³⁸ A bomb did eventually land too close to Hill, however, and he suffered a brain injury in Afghanistan in 2009, resulting in the loss of his executive function such that he could no longer serve in the military.

Worldly death is something that only happens to the Other, to the *unlucky*; while *I* am lucky, and *My* own death, to me, remains largely unimaginable.¹³⁹

This “naïve” mentality is not immutable, however, and it seems to diminish with Worldly experience. The reckoning may come as a rupture in one’s self-understanding, such as when Harry Parker acknowledges ‘It was about you this time’ (Parker 2016, 302). This trajectory from the sense of invincibility to the realisation that one’s own Self is not special and does not stand apart from the “One” which dies in the World is captured succinctly by one interviewee (a highly experienced soldier who has seen close-quarter combat on numerous occasions and who, at the time of interview, was still serving):

Before, I was like, of course I’ll survive because I’m me, and I’m essential to this story [...] I thought that [my death] will be a huge event, and the world will know. But that’ll just be another one of them. It’s so easy, and it’s such a small thing to get killed, you start to see how it could more easily happen. There’ll be a [soldier’s] funeral—I’ve seen plenty—and that’s all that. Maybe a reunion in a few years, maybe, and [then] everyone’ll get on, because that’s all there is to do, just get on. Then you realise it could happen to anyone, there’s nothing unique and special about you keeping it going (anonymous soldier; interviewee).

Another interviewee recalls the experience, soon after arriving in Afghanistan, of stumbling into a tent where a small memorial was taking place among soldiers who were about to depart Afghanistan at the end of their tour: ‘[They were commemorating] the six guys they’d lost’; ‘Up until that moment [...] it had been romantic, it had been like the commando novels – you know, people died but it’s not real, it’s just good entertainment. At that point, I thought, *Fuck, this is bad* [and] it landed on me that this was a real deal, that people were going to die’. In existentialist terms, each of these soldiers have acknowledged their own finitude; they have acknowledged that, in the eyes of the Other, they themselves have become the Other who might die. This might be described as a displacing of the narcissistic and arrogant ego and of appreciating one’s intersubjective equality among Others – the Others who were previously thought to be unique in dying.

To the extent that the soldier remains in the existential arrogance of the “One dies” attitude, however, what is the Worldly significance of the death of the Other? As I suggested above, the death

¹³⁹ Heidegger’s point is not to claim that this is universally true (since the threat of existential despair and anxiety is always present); rather, his theory describes a general societal attitude, particularly true of modernity, of denying the prospect of death – and arguably truer today than when Heidegger was writing in the early twentieth century. I am suggesting that the military institution has effectively harnessed this broader mentality.

of the Other—even for soldiers whose job is to kill and die—remains absurd. A Sergeant, for example, recounts the death of one of his soldiers who he had convinced to go to Afghanistan:

When you're on a CASEVAC [casualty evacuation] helicopter with some of your own soldiers who are wounded [...] and you know one of the soldiers has died in front of you [...], and you convinced them to come on the tour – all of those things hit you pretty quickly. And as we flew back to Bastion, we just remember, glancing over, once in a while, hoping that they could revive Luke and that perhaps they were mistaken; and then you just couldn't look any more, you just looked out of the [interviewee pauses to weep]. Sorry. (ITV News 2021b)

This impassioned testimony illustrates several of the themes I have been discussing. First, death presents itself as incomprehensible: The sergeant hopes—driven by his sense of guilt—that that which lay before his eyes is not as it is. Next, he cannot bear to look, not least because it is too painful, but also, I am suggesting, because it makes no sense – because this kind of death, actual death, was not meant to happen and had never been rehearsed on military exercises. Like in so many accounts, all that results is an appreciation of the senselessness of death and an inability to grasp its significance. As Heidegger says, ‘the dying of Others is not something which we experience in a genuine sense; at most we are always just “there alongside”’ (Heidegger 1927, 282 [239]). Such testimonies undermine the Romantic trope of modern war experience that witnessing war (and thus witnessing death) is a revelatory experience (Harari 2008).

This senseless absurdity of Worldly death, however, does not mean that it occurs without effect; and I want finally to explore a logic of how the dying and death of Others can validate the World by causing us to turn back into the world with reinvigorated force. This logic is captured by one interviewee in the immediacy of witnessing death:

and as soon as I saw his face – they were doing CPR on him, and he had a bullet wound in his armpit [...], and as they were doing CPR on him, blood was pumping out of his side. And I remember looking at his face. I jumped over him [...] and I remember looking down, and I'll never forget it [...], as they were doing CPR on him, his mouth was open, wide open – and I'd never really seen anything like that before [...], it's like his skin colour was like a pale green, it was like nothing I'd ever seen a face look like before. [...] And I knew as soon as I jumped over him, I was like, *That man is dead*, and I was like, *Fuck, that man is dead*, and I went to the ERV [Emergency Rendezvous], and got ready to get back into the fight (anonymous soldier; interviewee)

Here, it can first be noted that the repetitiveness of the testimony seems to be an indication of the absurdity of the scene itself, of the inability of mere words to capture what has occurred (*'Fuck, that man is dead'*, the soldier repeats). As recounted above, however, this sense of absurdity turns

immediately into a coherent Worldly action when, after repeating to himself ‘that man is dead’, and as if having nowhere else to turn, he simply does what he is trained to do in that moment, namely to ‘get back into the fight’. The death of the Other is brushed aside, not because it is trivial, but because it makes no sense; and the soldier simply turns back into the World. This *turning-into-the-World* is the existential processes which constitutes the meaningfulness of the World as such and which makes the World an indubitable refuge in which existence can manifest. In this particular moment, existential despair would of course be completely counterproductive – which is why combat soldiers are trained to embody certain “standard operating procedures” (SOPs) and act algorithmically in such situations.

Once the event has ended, however, it must—in hindsight and upon reflection—be interpreted and made sense of; it must be assimilated within an overarching Worldview (if, that is, it is not to cause existential crisis and disillusionment). Here, I want to explore a logic of how death—if it does not make the soldier flee *from* the World—makes him flee further “into” it. Indeed, because the soldier’s World is a World in which soldiers die, then a soldier’s death can have the effect of validating the soldier’s World – of confirming that it is indeed a soldier’s World, and that he is indeed a real soldier. One interviewee expresses this logic succinctly and honestly:

It was almost like bragging rights. That more people had died in our company, that more people had been shot, it was bragging rights that we’d had it harder than anyone else, we’d been in more firefights, we’ve fired more rounds, we’d lost more blokes, we’d been in the thick of it more than everyone else (anonymous soldier; interviewee).

Although most soldiers would not admit this sentiment directly—because it discloses the narrative structure of the World within which they live—I believe it is in fact consistent with the identity of “soldier”: A soldier’s identity hinges on fulfilling his role as someone who fights in wars, and soldiers who spend their careers without deploying on live operations often express a regret that they have not fulfilled some destiny. Indeed, a war story in which no one dies is (perversely) not much of a war story.

In the previous section, I examined the significance of existential death and argued that the anxiety provoked by the prospect of non-existence can explain our state of *being-in-the-World*. In this section, I have considered what becomes of death for the soldier once it becomes a Worldly event. While acknowledging that witnessing death may cause disillusionment and existential angst, I have explored how Worldly death can paradoxically validate the soldier’s Worldly existence. Until now, however, death has remained an absurd and unfathomable occurrence. In the following section, I explore how death is made sense of in Worldly terms; I explore the linguistic practices through which contemporary British soldiers, and the British military institution more broadly, cope with the prospect of death.

6.4. The Abstractions and Metaphors Soldiers Die By¹⁴⁰

Poetry does not fly above and surmount the earth in order to escape it and hover over it. Poetry is what brings [us] onto the earth, making [us] belong to it, and thus brings [us] into dwelling (Heidegger 1951, 216)

Because, in itself, the notion of death is absurd and constantly threatens to undermine Worldly existence by provoking unbearable anxiety (which, in turn, would result in a breakdown of social institutions), death must be socially harnessed and “made sense of” within social structures. These processes are starkly visible within military institutions which ritualise and ceremonialise death. In this section, I explore how the ultimately ineffable prospect of non-existence is rendered “comprehensible” in Worldly terms through linguistic processes. I am interested in how “death” is embedded in Worldly abstractions and metaphors, and how these terms then function to dispel the dreadfulness of non-existence and facilitate the act of risking one’s life for a given cause. To do so, I conduct an analysis of official government obituaries.

During the War in Afghanistan, the British government established a practice of publishing on its website obituary comments by senior officers, comrades, and family each time a British forces personnel died.¹⁴¹ I explore how these sources can offer insights into the way soldiers process and narrate the significance of death and suggest that these processes might be understood as *discursive coping* – a way of losing oneself in linguistic constructs and obscuring the absurdity of the referent object, i.e., non-existence. Language, in short, becomes a consolation for existential anxiety. As such, this section will complete our analysis of death ranging from the most existential to the most everyday and Worldly. This section will also complete our analysis of the significance of the soldier’s Self and World. By exploring the processes of how the significance of death is embodied by the soldier, we will be able to more clearly understand how war—an institution which centres around killing and dying—is itself embodied. As I have been arguing, moreover, the soldier is only an extreme case of this phenomenon: When we read a war novel or consume journalistic reporting on war, the existential significance of death is likewise invariably perverted into abstractions and metaphors.

¹⁴⁰ This title, as well as some of the reasoning in this section, is inspired by Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) *Metaphors We Live By*.

¹⁴¹ See the Introduction to this chapter.

A. *Abstractions of death*

How is language mobilised to make sense of death? In this subsection, I explore how death is embedded in particular abstractions, and how these terms then become a means of distracting from the absurd prospect of non-existence. The term “abstraction” etymologically implies separating something in thought, of isolating concepts which are united. Based on the verb to abstract, I am using “abstraction” here in the sense of ‘To withdraw or disengage (a person or the mind) from an object, experience, or activity, usually so as to be distracted or absorbed by something else’ (Oxford English Dictionary). My basic suggestion is that certain martial abstractions—such as “courage” and “professionalism”—serve to distract the soldier from the existential significance of death by perverting death into an institutional process. These abstractions of (existential) death then become the locus of a cultural discourse which makes sense of (Worldly) death.

Before discussing how abstractions are mobilised to make sense of death, I want to begin by outlining the general tone of the obituaries. The first thing that struck me reading the 60 obituaries to the Royal Marines is their light-hearted and personal tone. One marine, for example, formally remembers a comrade in the following terms: ‘Dale was a good friend of mine, he had such a great character always joking and smiling. He was a great listener and if you wanted to be cheered up he was perfect to make you smile. Miss you dearly mate, love Tom’ (British government 2021k). Comrades also frequently honoured the dead by continuing the banter which would have characterised their Worldly existence together. A corporal, for instance, says of his dead friend that ‘Even though his time keeping was horrendous, with his calm, laid back character, ‘Dee’ always managed to get things sorted, big or small’ (British government 2021a). This personal register is also employed by senior officers (who typically pretend that they knew the soldier personally). A Commanding Officer (a Lieutenant Colonel), for example, honours one of his dead marines in the following terms:

His courage and enthusiasm inspired so many people. I *knew him* to be a man who was entirely selfless, loyal and dedicated. A [...] Spartan, a hero, he was by every measure the model Commando who was always there at the front. He died on patrol in central Sangin, tragically on the eve of his 24th birthday, but he died with pride, doing the job he loved and amongst his band of brothers, his friends who will love him forever (British government 2021o, my emphasis)

These statements reflect the general tone of the 60 obituaries to Royal Marines. Personalised and light-hearted, each obituary outlines the everyday idiosyncrasies of the deceased.

Within these sentimentalised responses, however, are certain recurrent and abstract terms which are mobilised to make sense of death. From my analysis, two of the most frequently used are

“courageousness” and “professionalism”. Senior officers, comrades, and sometimes even family, it seems, have taken consolation that the deceased possessed these particular qualities. In the rest of this subsection, I offer an empirical and theoretical analysis of the significance of these two terms.

Of the 60 obituaries to Royal Marines, references to courage occur 111 times across 37 obituaries. One marine, for example, is described by his Commanding Officer as ‘being at the front, courageously closing with the enemy, with no thought for his own safety, just that of his colleagues who were close by’ (British government 2021s). Another dead marine is described by the same officer as ‘Courageous and proficient when in contact with the enemy, [and that] his fighting spirit was indomitable’ (British government 2021j). Although the notion of courage is employed primarily by senior officers, there are also examples of peers finding consolation in this discourse. One Corporal, for example, said of his second-in-command that he ‘was a fearless Commando and a courageous leader always showing cheerfulness under adversity’ (British government 2021f). A comrade and friend of another dead Marine writes:

I know it is a cliché to say it but Scotty really was the personification of a Royal Marine Commando. His selflessness, dedication, determination, courage, integrity and sense of duty were just some of the qualities that make Scotty a perfect example of what a Bootneck [Marine] should be to everyone from the youngest Marine to the most grizzled SNCO [senior non-commissioned officer] (British government 2021r, Cf., 2021m, 2021h)

Although such terms seem to be a way of honouring the deceased—a way of saying something positive—they also seem to be a way of making sense of the fact that the given life is disembodied and embedded in the discursive ideals of the military institution.

“Courage”, however, does not seem to be the most esteemed quality of the deceased. More important and consoling seems to be the tribute of “professionalism”.¹⁴² While references to “courage” occur 111 times, references to “professionalism” occur 281 times and are made in all but 4 of the 60 obituaries I have analysed (and 3 of those 4 are extremely brief, and the other, which is longer, uses terms synonymous with professionalism). Commanding Officers, for example, honour their dead soldiers by describing them as ‘highly’, ‘hugely’, ‘utterly’, and ‘consummate[ly]’ ‘professional’ (British government 2021t, 2021i, 2021q, 2021n). Comrades also seem to find significance in this accolade. A Lance Corporal summarises one Marine as being ‘keen’ and ‘very professional even though he was only 19 years old’ (British government 2021q); while a corporal describes his deceased colleague as

¹⁴² The shift towards the professionalisation of the combat soldier is already well documented in the literature. See, for example, King (2013). King has also documented this trend in these obituaries ((King 2010; Cf., Danilova 2015).

‘one of the most professional and hard-working friends’ (British government 2021l). Even grieving family find consolation in such terms: In a joint statement, one family, for example, describes their son and brother as being ‘proud to serve his country’ and that he was ‘much admired and respected by his colleagues for his professionalism and courage’ (British government 2021g). The father of another Marine opens his obituary statement by observing that his son’s ‘professionalism was widely acknowledged’ (British government 2021h). This analysis suggests that “professionalism” is a cornerstone of contemporary militarised discourse in the British military and a primary abstraction through which death is made sense of.

What is the Worldly significance of “courage” and “professionalism”; and how are these traits a consolation for death? To answer these questions, I want to begin by posing a distinction between what might be termed “high” and “low” abstractions of death and dying. By “high” abstraction, I am referring to a diction which is particularly characteristic of an era—between the mid-eighteenth-century and the First World War—of romanticising war experience. Here, abstractions such as “sacrifice”, “falling”, and “courage” are characteristically employed to narrate the significance of death. By “low” abstractions, on the other hand, I am referring to a turn in this discourse which characterises the soldier in more humble terms consistent with everyday society – hence the notion of “professionalism”.¹⁴³ Based on this distinction, it is notable that abstractions of death employed by British soldiers tend to be of a lowly and humble nature relative to more Romantic military discourses of the past. Take, for instance, the notion of “falling”. British soldiers no longer “fall” in battle but simply “die”.¹⁴⁴ “Falling”, as such, remains a part of the heritage of war – it is “handed down”, but not deemed appropriate, useful, or compelling enough to be “taken up”. In this case, a few exceptions prove the rule: Of the 60 obituaries to deceased Royal Marines, for example, the notion of “falling” occurs only three times – two of which in descriptions by senior officers.¹⁴⁵ Why is “falling” not suitable/appropriate to make sense of death,

¹⁴³ My inspiration for this distinction is Paul Fussell’s notion of “‘high” diction’ in his *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975, 24). Fussell offers a ‘table of equivalents’ for ‘this “raised,” essentially feudal language’ (and I cite only a few which persist today): A friend is a *comrade*; danger is *peril*; bravery considered after the fact is *valour*; the dead on the battlefield are *the fallen*; the front is the *field*; actions are *deeds*; not to complain is to be *manly*; a soldier is a *warrior*; one’s death is one’s *fate* (Fussell 1975, 22–23; see also Bogacz 1986). My aim below is to show the existential significance of such terms.

¹⁴⁴ “Falling” is not simply a euphemism for death (like the notion of “passing away” is in broader society); it seems, rather, to be a means of glorifying and eternalising the dead soldier – often for civic purposes (Mosse 1990, 36–37; 101; 105; Gilks 2021a, 5–6).

¹⁴⁵ One Commanding Officer, a Lieutenant Colonel, for example, refers to one of his dead marines as ‘[joining] an illustrious list of fallen heroes whose bravery, selflessness, determination and dedication inspire us all’ (British

while dying “professionally” is? From the Heideggerian perspective developed above, “professionalism” can be understood as representing the everyday World of the British soldier: The soldier has lost his Self in the “they” of the military institution where “professionalism” is a central virtue. This institution then provides the resources for discursive coping in the face of death; and to die “professionally” is somehow a consolation for the absurdity of non-existence – or at least a way of making sense of it.

B. Metaphors of death

Beyond the abstractions discussed above, and at a slightly more sophisticated level of what I have described as *discursive coping*, are the metaphors used to make sense of death. Here, I want to focus especially on two which occur among front line combat troops. The first is that death is referred to as “end-ex”, an abbreviated term in military slang which literally refers to the *end of (a military) exercise*. In his memoir about his experience of being blown up in Afghanistan, for example, triple amputee, Mark Ormrod, describes his underlying mentality soon after his injury when he pleaded with his wife to assist him with suicide: ‘If crawling across a floor measuring progress in fractions of an inch was what life had to offer, then screw that, I’m outta here. Better all round to call Endex and get it over with’ (Ormrod 2009, 288). What does it mean to treat one’s own life, or the life of an Other, as a mere “exercise”? Does this metaphor have an effect on lived experience, on one’s *Being-towards-death*? And, as a speech act, what does this metaphor *do* in the soldier’s World?

The overarching function of the *end-ex* metaphor, I contend, is to articulate the unfathomable (and thus the dreadful) in Worldly (and thus palatable) terms. In this case, the soldier’s Worldly term *end-ex* expresses a notion with which the soldier is *essentially familiar* by virtue of the World in which he exists – since his vocation entails endless exercises in the process of *becoming* the soldier; and “death” thereby becomes *significant* in the sense that it points to other Worldly entities.¹⁴⁶ “Death” now

government 2021n, Cf., 2021h); while another senior officer describes how one of his corporals ‘fell protecting his men’ (British government 2021b).

¹⁴⁶ See discussion in Chapter 4.2.D about my technical use (following Heidegger) of the term “significance”. In brief: to be “significant”, an entity *points* to another entity, creating a meaningful relation between those two entities. More broadly—and metaphorically—significations create “webs of significance” within which Life is suspended – a metaphor I borrow from Geertz (1973, 5). I am also using the term “familiar” in a technical Heideggerian sense: Heidegger writes, for example, that ‘Dasein [...] is ‘in’ the world in the sense that it deals with entities encountered within-the-world, and does so concernfully and with familiarity’ (Heidegger 1927, 104/138).

points, for example, not to the ineffable and thus to anxiety and despair, but to that Worldly feeling that something merely Worldly has ended: Namely, to the feeling the soldier has when an exercise is over, when the friendly and enemy dead come back to life, and when he is bound for the comfort of the barracks. As such, “death” has been brought down to earth, so to speak; it has been woven into the web of significance which holds the soldier’s World together.

Despite the connotations of the term “exercise”, however, the *end-ex* metaphor should not necessarily be understood as a trivialisation of, nor a euphemism for, death. As one interviewee expresses, recounting the sudden realisation that *He* might die on his coming mission: ‘Losing your life is so final, it’s so end-ex, that’s it, it’s gone, it’s over, this is real’ (anonymous soldier; interviewee). To understand the nuanced significance of the *end-ex* metaphor, it is necessary to appreciate the phenomenological significance of the military exercise for the soldier: Namely, it is a process of conditioning and *becoming*, and is tied up with the soldier’s existential status *qua* soldier. From the phenomenological perspective, therefore, *end-ex* seems to be a linguistic means of rendering the unfathomable into Worldly and everyday terms – thus dissolving the absurdity of non-existence. This metaphor therefore becomes the practical/discursive means by which the soldier flees from death into-the-World.

So far in this section, I have been describing some of the abstractions and metaphors that soldiers and the broader militarised community employ to make sense of the event of dying. Beyond this, however, soldiers also employ discursive means to make sense of the state of non-existence per se – that is, the state of *being-no-longer-in-the-World*, to use Heidegger’s (1927, 238/281) term. Here, like in many other domains of social activity, the notion of an afterlife, or an alternate, non-Worldly existence, is invoked. To give just a few examples: One Marine closes his obituary statement to his dead comrade by saying: ‘See you soon Ben, but hopefully not too soon!’ (British government 2021c); a Colour Sergeant closes his obituary statement to a fellow Sergeant by saying: ‘Another good bloke taken. Rest easy fella. See you on the flip side’ (British government 2021v); and a Warrant Officer closes his statement to a dead corporal by saying: ‘you will be sorely missed bud, see you at the great bar in the sky mate. Yours aye’; and a Marine honouring the same corporal says: ‘see you on the other side. The first round is on you’ (British government 2021b). Another Marine closes his statement to a dead Marine by saying: ‘see you in the Big Man’s Bar’ (British government 2021p). The drinking culture of the Royal Marines is apparently even relevant in death; and the faithful proposition that one day they will have another beer together is somehow a consolation for loss and a distraction from the absurdity of non-existence.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁷ Based on a preliminary (qualitative) reading of a broader sample of obituaries, it seems that this way of discursively coping with death by invoking an afterlife is predominantly employed by front line combat troops,

This notion of an afterlife is captured well in a second metaphor I want to discuss: Long after the given soldier falls in battle, and when the last of his comrades grows old and eventually dies, it is posited that there will be a “re-org” (“reorganisation”) – a kind of reunion in some sort of afterlife. Paying tribute to his dead comrade, for example, one Marine writes:

‘Big Reach’, what can I say mate? I am absolutely gutted. Never wanted to turn a job down, big or small, and always on a constant high. ‘Bags of Morale’ and a true oppo (opposite number) who would do anything for the lads and I would do anything for you mate. Once again I am gutted and really choked for words; my thoughts are with your family and girlfriend at this difficult time. I’ll see you on the ‘Reorg’ mate. (British government 2021n)

“Reorg” has a tactical origin; it is used by front line combat troops to refer to the process of *reorganising* at the end of a battle: After an enemy position has been attacked and the enemy has been killed, for example, the section commander will shout “reorg” and the soldiers will convene on one location and restore order (including replenishing ammunition, accounting for casualties, and falling back into formation) in preparation for the next tasking.¹⁴⁸ When used metaphorically to refer to death, therefore, life, as a whole, is characterised as a battle, after which there will be a “reorg” – a taking stock and final assessment of events, not dissimilar to the Christian notion of Judgement.¹⁴⁹ I do not want to make the claim here that this term is motivational – that, for example, it facilitates self-sacrifice by contextualising life within the broader significance of (martial) eternity (although this seems to follow from my argument). My focus, rather, is to show how the remaining soldiers cope with and make sense of death. Like the *end-ex* metaphor, *re-org* diminishes the absurdity and dreadfulness of non-existence by bringing the prospect of death down to earth and thereby rendering it comprehensible. Covered up in militarised discourse, death becomes *familiar* as something *in* the soldier’s World. The *re-org* metaphor, as such, restores meaning to the soldiers’ war and to their *Being* as soldiers.

and especially within elite regiments such as the Parachute Regiment and the Royal Marines where warrior cultures develop. Further analysis might conduct a quantitative analysis of different regiments to determine in which micro-cultures these discourses are more prevalent.

¹⁴⁸ Across the 60 obituaries to Royal Marines, this metaphor is used on at least 10 separate occasions. Sometimes the message is so clear that it is left implicit: Another Marine, for example, closes his obituary statement by saying ‘Rest well now Jimbo, see you again in the obvious [i.e., re-org]’ (British government 2021n). The “re-org” metaphor is also used within the Parachute Regiment (e.g., British government 2021d, 2021e), although I have not conducted a quantitative analysis of its frequency.

¹⁴⁹ As I have pointed out in Chapter 5 (Section 5.3.B), where I discussed the Orientalisation of Afghanistan as a biblical scene, Christian themes infuse British military culture.

6.5. Conclusions

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger theorises how ‘dying’, in the everyday world, ‘is perverted into an event of public occurrence’ (Heidegger 1927, 297 [253]). This “perversion” detracts us from a more “authentic” apprehension of death – namely, from an acceptance of our finitude, of our inevitable and always-impending non-existence (Heidegger 1927, 293 [250]). “Proximally and for the most part”—to use Heidegger’s language—this prospect is simply too unfathomable and dreadful, and so in the face of anxiety we “flee” into the everyday World, doubling down on our efforts to disguise death in cultural symbols. Despite our efforts, however, the prospect of death never disappears, and Heidegger’s existentialist analysis reveals how consequential death is for our Worldly sojourns: The anxiety of existential death is the source of our Worldly efforts to cover up the prospect of death. In this existentialist sense, therefore, our World, our Reality, is contingent on the prospect of death.

In this chapter, I have examined these processes in the context of the contemporary British military institution. In the first section, I showed how even experienced combat soldiers whose primary job is to kill find the notion of death absurd and incomprehensible. I argued that the soldier flees *into-the-World* from existential death; and that the World, as such, becomes a sort of “refuge” from the anxiety provoked by non-existence. (And it is simply an ironic paradox that, in this empirical context, the soldier’s “refuge” from death is a particularly deadly place). Having fled into-the-World from existential death, in the second section I then explored the significance of Worldly death. First, I considered how, for the most part, the soldier understands himself as immortal, and understands death as something that only happens to the Other. I then explored how the prospect of Worldly death nevertheless has the effect of validating the World in which the soldier enacts his Self. In the final section of this chapter, I then explored how Worldly death is made sense of in Worldly terms. Specifically, I considered some of the abstractions and metaphors that contemporary British soldiers employ to pervert death into a public occurrence.

The broader purpose of this chapter has been to explore how the soldier’s life is structured in relation to the prospect of both existential and Worldly death. It has been my contention that all of the soldier’s Worldly endeavours—from the most mundane everyday procedures to the most overarching purposes—are effected and determined by the prospect of *no-longer-Being-in-the-world*. In its dreadful incomprehensibility, death makes the soldier *turn-into-the-world*, thereby constitutively reinforcing his World and Self. *Death*, as such, is a vital force without which Life could not be possible. Death is the uttermost horizon on all ontology – particularly the ontology of war.

7. Conclusion

For the human animal which exists in and through social relationships, war—like death—is an ever-impending possibility – if not an actuality. Humans may exist during prolonged periods of peace – amicably, compassionately, lovingly, or simply indifferently; in existentialist terms, they may exist *for-the-sake-of-one-another*, or simply *alongside-one-another* or *apart-from-one-another*. Yet it remains an essential possibility of a Being such as ourselves that our social relations may descend into enmity – into what I have theorised existentially as *Being-against*; and from here, as we have seen, the descent may continue into organised and violent fighting (which I have theorised as the telos of *Being-against*), and into the destruction, injury, pain, and death which fighting produces. This existential possibility is inalienable. No institutional or technological evolution can change this fact. To be sure, the *manifest significance of war*—both in its existential essence of *Being-against* and in its necessary and contingent historical occurrence—can be undermined and even negated. But war cannot be excised as a possibility which lays before us. War, or the possibility thereof, is an essential feature of social existence as we know it.

Given this existential predicament, the underlying methodological contention of this thesis has been that war must not be theoretically disavowed from the humans who embody it and thereby establish its existence and historical continuity. The disavowal of war has a long legacy in Western thought. The archetypical example is the Greek poets, who outsourced our warring tendencies to the gods of war, portraying humans as feebly subject to exogenous whims. Although they must be credited with recognising the tragic persistence of war in human activity, these poets undermined our intellectual responsibility to own up to that for which we are essentially culpable – as Beings for whom bellicosity is not only an essential possibility but too often a proclivity. In the post-Enlightenment era, the disavowal of war has taken the form of normative condescension, where war is seen as an aberration from proper human conduct and as the shame of humanity. Normatively well-intentioned as this may be, the central premise of this thesis is that the disavowal of war inhibits our ability to understand and effectively critique it. If war is characterised as improper, as antithetical to human meaning, or as exogenous to human will, then the logics of war as a distinctively human phenomenon will not be subject to proper analysis. Shameful as it is from the privilege of peace, we must not be embarrassed about war. We must, rather, recognise that war is a part of who we are – that our “propriety” and “humanity” have been built on the foundations of war and militarism, and that a thousand years of

“perpetual peace” would not change the fact that war is an ever-impending possibility which lays before us. War, therefore, must be theorised on its own terms, prior to normative and ontological commitments.

My method has been phenomenology, and more specifically Heideggerian existentialist and hermeneutical phenomenology. I have sought to show that the method of phenomenology can shed new light on the phenomenon of war – that we can come to see its expansiveness, its structure, its historical logics, its consequences, and indeed its essence, in a new way. Phenomenology has guided and grounded the substantive ontological and methodological commitments made throughout the chapters above. If social science is understood as entailing a necessary dialectic between ontology and methodology—where presuppositional ontological commitments determine which methods are appropriate, while, simultaneously, presuppositional methodological commitments determine which object is visible and important in the first place—then phenomenology has been the overarching perspective within which I have resolved this dialectic. Thus, the ontological question foundational to all war studies literature (*What is war?*) has been answered phenomenologically – since, as Heidegger shows, only as phenomenology is ontology possible; and in response to the equally foundational methodological question (*How should war be studied?*), I have shown that the Being of war must be disclosed in its historically contingent manifestations which are embodied and enacted by human beings in and through time and space. Phenomenology, as such, has provided the meta-theoretical perspective which has both yielded the object of study and has guided the way I approach that object. In the rest of this conclusion, I offer a conclusive summary of the chapters above, and I then discuss limitations of *this* phenomenology of war and briefly consider how future research might advance the method of phenomenology in war studies.

7.1. Summary of chapters

Although I hope that this phenomenology of war will stand alone as an insightful perspective on the phenomenon of war, I have sought (in Chapter 2) to couch the contribution of this thesis specifically in relation to recent developments in the field of critical war studies. This is for two main reasons: Firstly, because scholars within this area have recently produced many insights which, if not explicitly phenomenological, draw similar conclusions to those I have drawn here, conclusions which support and I believe are supported by mine. And secondly, because there are theoretical shortcomings of this extant research which can be resolved through a phenomenological method. In particular, I considered two separate and dominant strands of this literature which both contribute to and could benefit from the phenomenology I have offered here. The first is a move towards the ontology of war and a general claim that war is ontogenetic/generative. I focused on the recent and influential thesis by Tarak Barkawi and Shane Brighton (2011) which proposes a Foucauldian/Clausewitzian ontology of war to understand its

ontogenetic logics. Besides their important contributions which I discussed in the chapter, I argued that the agential *human* body, as the necessary site and source of any epistemic structure of war (of what they call “War/Truth”), is obscured within the logics of an exogenous “power”. In short, the *human* body is missing from their analysis. To address this, as well as seeking a means to ground the ontology of war in the human body more generally, I turned to a second strand in the literature – to what might be categorised as the corporeal and experiential “turns” (including the nascent phenomenological “turn”). I focused on the seminal work of Elaine Scarry (1985) and the subsequent work of Kevin McSorley (e.g., 2013), Christine Sylvester (e.g., 2013a), and a recent paper by Tanya Narozhna (2021). Although these theorists provide important theoretical, methodological, and normative tools for understanding embodiment, I argued that their object of study is not war itself but the negative effects of war, namely injury. In both cases, therefore, war remains strangely disavowed from the human body – from the humans who embody it and establish its historical continuity. In the first case, war is not theorised as a *human* phenomenon; and in the second case, the phenomenon of war is not directly theorised at all, but only its consequences. I concluded Chapter 2 by suggesting that the insights from these strains of literature need to be integrated – that the ontogenetic “force” of war needs to be theorised as essentially embodied. The phenomenology of war developed in Chapter 3 can be situated in this context.

In Chapter 3 I developed two lines of argument, one hermeneutical and the other existentialist, which I sought to integrate towards the end of the chapter. Hermeneutically, I argued that war is a tradition which is “handed down” and “taken up” between successive generations and that this process constitutes war’s historical continuity as a manifest phenomenon of human existence. I contrasted this view to what I characterised as *analytic historicism* – the view that war has a “nature” and a “character”, and that each instance of war exists in virtue of its shared nature. Although this method is an important underpinning of comparative positivist research, I sought to reveal its limitations. Specifically, war is characterised as an ahistorical phenomenon, and its historical contingency is obscured. I argued that war is not conceptually continuous but phenomenally continuous as a practice embraced and embodied by human beings in and through time. But what, then, *is* war? What is it that is “handed down” and “taken up” and thereby established as historically continuous? To answer these questions, I conducted an existentialist-phenomenological analysis of war in the second half of Chapter 3 (Section 3.3). I argued that the ontological question *What is war?* must be subsumed within the phenomenological method. Drawing on Heidegger’s notions of *Being*, *Being-in-the-world*, and *Being-with*, I argued that the fundamental significance of war is *Being-against* (or enmity). *Being-against* is that which structures both *war itself* (including the fighting which occurs in outbreaks and the anticipation and aftermath of war), as well as the *idea of war* (that which we encounter in “historical” and “fictional” narrative and

that which is embedded in material, legal, political, and artistic infrastructure). This phenomenological approach allows us to see how the practice of war and the idea of war are mutually constitutive.

Ontologically, therefore, war is constituted in a two-fold existential-hermeneutic significance. *Existentially*, war is an ever-impending possibility of Being-in-the-world in the form of *Being-against*, the telos of which is violent and organised fighting which invariably causes injury and death. As a way of *Being*, moreover, war is necessarily embodied. We can embody war most literally, by having an enemy and by fighting that enemy, by injuring and being injured; but we can also embody war as an idea, by observing it, reading about it, and knowing it. *Hermeneutically*, as a possibility, the existential significance of war is always manifest in a particular historical context. Although Being-against can emerge relatively organically from incommensurate wills, it is always manifest in contingent historical (cultural/material) conditions. Thus, there is no such thing as general war, but only particular war, occurring *here* or *there*, *now* or *then*. As a manifest phenomenon, therefore, war must be studied and understood in and through its historical particularities.

Studying war in one of its historically manifest particularities was my aim in Part Two of this thesis, where I sought to illustrate and clarify the theoretical groundwork outlined in Part One. I focused on the case of the contemporary British soldier in Afghanistan. The soldier, as I explained in the Introduction, offers an extreme case for understanding how war is embodied and constituted; and I suggested that understanding the significance of war for the soldier facilitates an understanding of the significance of war more generally (since the “general” must always be approached through the particular). Part Two comprised three chapters, each of which focused on a different dimension of the soldier’s *Being-in-the-world*. Chapter 4 explored the subjectivity of the soldier and how it is constituted in relation to the objects and subjects of war. I examined the drawn-out processes through which war is embodied and projected as a way of Being. In Chapter 4, however, the World remained only implicit, and Chapter 5 therefore explored the World (or the War Scene) as the existential milieu of the soldier’s subjectivity. I showed how the World—in this case, *Afghan*, or *Ganners*—is contingent on the existential projections of the subjectivities which exist in and through that World. Further, I provided the basis for understanding how the things we do are so intimately bound up with the World in which we find ourselves that we cannot make sense of our doing outside of our world. The things we do are always done *in-the-world*, and that World is always the context of our doing. Chapters 4 and 5, as such, completed a descriptive analysis of the soldier’s particular state of *Being-in-the-World*. Chapter 6 then explored the significance of the soldier’s death in war – that final ontological possibility which is essential to all life but which is particularly characteristic of war. I argued that the prospect of death—both in its existential sense and in its everyday perversions—makes the soldier *turn-into-the-World*, and that death is therefore (paradoxically) a motivating force in war. Together, these chapters have

sought to disclose the soldier's *Being* in relation to war, and war in relation to the historical particularity of the soldier's Being.

7.2. Advancing the phenomenology of war

Where might the phenomenology of war go from here? In the absence of existing phenomenological research on war, one of my primary aims in this thesis has been to provide a precedent which can be built on and critiqued by future studies. There are several ways this might be done. Firstly, this thesis might be critiqued on its own terms. Although (theoretically) I have attempted to outline the universal existential and hermeneutical structure of war and (methodologically) I have claimed that the method of phenomenology is the necessary foundation for the ontology of war, there will no doubt be philosophical shortcomings in my interpretation of the sources I have used. I have sought to provide an overarching theory of war, and no such theory is going to be free from inconsistencies and contradictions, subtle or fundamental. Future research might address these inconsistencies/contradictions and facilitate a clearer understanding of the phenomenon of war. Furthermore, there may be shortcomings with how I have applied this phenomenology of war empirically. In Part Two of this thesis, I sought to clarify and advance the philosophical notions developed in Part One by applying them to the case of the contemporary British soldier in Afghanistan. Like any case, however, this case is inherently limited in scope. The application of this theory to different cases might reveal the basic philosophical notions as in need of clarification or revision.

Beyond critiquing this work on its own terms, it might be critiqued from different phenomenological perspectives. Phenomenology teaches us that our understanding of things is necessarily bound by perspective, and that although we can (and indeed must) transcendently circumvent the things we perceive by giving them corporeal and temporal flesh, we cannot overcome the fact that our understanding is inherently contingent on its situatedness in time and space. As I explained in the Introduction, I have not only tried to be explicit about *my* situatedness but I have also tried to leverage it in an autoethnographic sense. Both “war” and “phenomenology” mean something specific to me, and I have sought to convince the reader that the way I have conceived them and brought them together can yield important insights, both about war and about phenomenology. Yet, by definition, my biases will inherently limit the scope of my perspective; and exposing the limitations of these biases from other perspectives would help advance the contribution of phenomenology to war studies.

One way in which the phenomenology of war might be taken forward from here is to more explicitly incorporate normativity into the theoretical analysis. As discussed at the beginning of this Conclusion, I have been clear that I have considered a priori normative commitments as a potential

limitation to the study of war. If we see war through the lens of abhorrence and disgust, we will not see war for what it is to so many people so much of the time, *i.e.*, a meaningful and purposeful way of *Being-in-the-World*; and we will not, in consequence, be able to understand it and effectively critique it. Thus, as I explained in Chapter 2, I sought to theoretically bracket my own moral commitments. Yet, as many of the theorists I considered in Chapter 2 have also shown, this can be normatively problematic, especially when academic discourses lead us to overlook the pain and suffering which occurs at the epicentre of war, both in terms of the fighting and in terms of the grief that fighting precipitates. In these final paragraphs, therefore, I want to clearly state my own normative stance and reflect on how phenomenology and normativity can be integrated in future research.

Let me first make a moral claim: The phenomenon of war in human affairs is a moral problem. No logical proof can be given for this claim – only the self-evident sentiment brought about by the enjoyment of peace and everything that peace facilitates. From the privilege of this sentiment, war is indeed the shame of humanity. This is not to say that war is not a moral necessity in some contexts, but that the necessity of war—when indeed it is a necessity—is morally unfortunate. It is unfortunate when it becomes a necessity for the possibility of *Being-against* to be manifest as an actuality. So how can phenomenology help us effectively critique war – beyond merely understanding it? How can phenomenology advance the agenda of peace? Ultimately, this question is methodologically crucial because methodological validity is contingent on value, and value on morality.

One answer may be found in the phenomenological distinction between possibility and actuality. Metaphysically, this distinction constitutes the condition for the possibility of ethics and normativity: We *should* do something else because we *can* do something else, *i.e.*, something else is possible. From the phenomenological perspective, we can understand the *possible* as contingent on our ability to project it forth into actuality. The possible, as a realm beyond the actual, is neither infinite nor finite. As the objective yield of the imagination, rather, the possible is that which springs forth from the inherent potential of *Being-in-the-world*. The *possible*, as such, is a phenomenon which pertains to a *Being* such as ourselves, with freedom and imagination. Phenomenology can then disclose the nature and extent of our inherent freedom to choose our way of *Being-in-the-world*. Although we may not have the privilege of *choosing* once the enemy is already crossing the frontier, war has tended to expand well beyond such moral necessity – both into expeditionary war and into the militaristic fabric of everyday life. In the face of this expansiveness, we can choose not to validate war as an unnecessary way of *Being-in-the-world*. This is not to condemn the martial virtues (for at times, from certain perspectives, martial virtues are indeed virtues). It is, rather, to give these virtues their rightful place among our possibilities, only to be actualised when the moral conditions are right. War is a possibility, but so is peace, since lives can be lived in their entirety without ever knowing war – ignorant of their pugnacious history and of their inalienable existential possibility for *Being-against*. Ontologically, war, as we have seen, is a

contingent phenomenon: It is contingent on human freedom, on being freely embodied and enacted by human Beings. This contingency on human freedom means that war can also be existentially negated.

This leads to more pragmatic considerations: That phenomenology can disclose the fickle contingencies of war and guide efforts—where morally appropriate—to undermine those contingencies. As we saw in Chapter 4, the significance of war can be ruptured, and *Being* can re-invent itself within new structures. In some instances, the disclosure of war's significance may itself be sufficient to undermine that significance. Like the trick of a magician, some structures of meaning are contingent on being mysterious and unknown; but once the hitherto enchanted Subject sees through the World, they may realise it was an existentially counter-productive—or even a meaningless—place. As an existential structure of space and time, I believe that war tends to undermine itself in this way – but unfortunately, often not until much damage has been done. Phenomenology, as such, can help us understand the phenomenon of war as a contingent structure of human existence.

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