

Is War “Irrational”? Three Philosophical Paradigms from Antiquity to Hegel*

by Marco Duichin **

“We couldn’t find the peace denouncing the irrationality of the war”
J. Rawls

1. There is no doubt that the quest for peace is one of the most important goals of mankind, and one of its deepest aims, earlier – it will be useful to remember this – of the appearance of the nuclear weapons (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1979). If Hegel is right, in the *Philosophie der Geschichte* (I, II, 2 a), to define human history as a “huge laughter-house”, it’s indeed true that the wish of a peaceful world, where every war is finally banished, goes back from the beginning of western civilization, and it has already been well exemplifying in Homer’s lines (*Il.* XVIII, 107). Since the second middle of the 20th century, nevertheless, in the West’s european social conscience, in particular among large masses of young people, it will be more and more fashionable – with a comprehensible rejection of war as an *instrument* of aggression, oppression, and bloody resolution of the disputes among peoples – a *vulgata opinio* about the intrinsic *irrationality* of its *nature* (sometimes spread even to the so-called “humanitarian wars”: on this see Walzer, 1977; Rawls, 1999). This wide-spread opinion, which links, in a strange way, supporters of the clerical party and members of the whiggish intelligentsia, it is based on an ideological prejudice – war=*irrationality/madness* – that, to a careful historical-critical examination, it appears in reality as an ingenuous *locus communis*, respectable from a moral point of view, but baseless from a philosophical one.

In short, it seems implicitly to involve two specular, axiological presuppositions: (1) that peace isn’t indeed the most desirable *ideal* condition for the mankind, an *artificial* state which must be therefore *pursued*, but it’s a kind of *real* and *natural* condition already given, ontologically inscribed in the *rational* order of the world; (2) and so war, as an *unnatural* subversion of this pre-existent condition of peace among men, and *foolish* violation of a wordly order rationally established, it is nothing else that a mere *irrationality*, *absurdity*, *aberration*, *madness* (see Lalande, 2000).

Developed above all within a religious framework, this assumption takes its roots more in the irenistic-philanthropic tradition of Evangelical matrix (cf. Bosc, 1977; Toschi, 1980), according to which *bellare semper illicitum est*, than into the classical texts of the western philosophical tradition, where – in spite of the edifying reproach of Erasmus, Saint-Pierre, or Voltaire, against the execrable ‘madness’ of war – the *rhetorical appeal* to “the arms of reason” gives way, much more often than we can suppose nowadays, to the *theoretical legitimation* of “the reason of arms” (Mori, 1984; Duichin, 1991).

In fact, if the Proto-Christian pacifism before, and the culture of the Enlightenment after, linked by the myth of an abstract universal reason, metaphysical principle of unity and harmony, agreed on considering war an *unnatural*, *irrational*, and *pathological* phenomenon (obscure heritage of barbaric customs, or infamous product of the senseless folly of The Powerful), a whole authoritative philosophical tradition, from the Pre-Socratics to Hegel, instead acknowledges a peculiar *rationality* of the war. Mainly: on the contrary to the today’s *communis opinio*, for a large number of thinkers, war not only *has got* a reason (or better, a plurality of ‘reasons’: historical, political, legal, ethical, etc.), but *it’s itself* a reason, a *ratio*, a *logos*, namely an essential and necessary aspect of the whole reality (Tzschirner, 1815; von Clausewitz, 1832/34; cf. Bobbio, 1979; Mori, 1984).

* This paper has been read and discussed in the XXIst World Congress of Philosophy (Istanbul, August 10-17, 2003).

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2. Far be it from limiting to the moralistic disapprovals about the 'madness' of war, philosophy is always talking about the complexity of its nature, searching to understand it, to explain it, and – sometimes – to justify it. In this paper I would like to draw the attention to the three different philosophical paradigms, concerning the notion of war, that mix each other along the whole history of western thought, from the primordial starting point of the Hellenic civilization to the beginning of the 19th century. I'll try to enounce them schematically:

(1) the war as *reason*, i.e. the *natural* condition of mankind as an ontological state of *non-peace*;

(2) the war as *reasonable unreason*, i.e. the condition of mankind as a state of peace *precarious* and *temporary*, whose the defence (if it's threatened), or restoration (if it's broken), justify and legitimate *rationally* the use (otherwise *unreasonable*) to the arms, restricting the duration, and conforming it to the purpose to reach;

(3) the war as *irrationality*, i.e. the *natural* condition of mankind as an ontological state of *peace*.

According to these 'polemological' paradigms, it is so possible to distinguish three main theoretical trends: (a) the first – even if with significant differences and variations inside – it is a supporter of the 'naturalness' and the 'rationality' of war (it includes some of the most famous philosophers of any time: e.g. Heraclitus, Plato, Hobbes, Kant, Hegel, etc.); (b) the second – even if against, as general idea, to the war – recognizes it as a necessary means to reach or to save peace, and shares the ethical-legal principle of *bellum justum* (to going back to Aristotle, it includes famous exponents whether of medieval Christian philosophy or from the different jusnaturalistic and contractualistic modern currents: e.g. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Gentili, Grotius, Thomasius, Pufendorf, Locke, Rousseau *et al.*); (c) the third – in reality minor – it is defender of the absolute unlawfulness of war, and of its unconditional condemnation as a crime *kat'exochén*, contrary to every law of nature and of reason (it is circumscribed, in the modern age, to some exponents of the Christian secularized pacifism: e.g. Erasmus of Rotterdam, the Abbé de Saint-Pierre, etc.; or to the philosophers and encyclopaedists of the 18th century: e.g. Voltaire, d'Holbach, de Jaucourt, Helvétius, Diderot, Condorcet, etc.). I shall limit myself, for the sake of brevity, only to some considerations about the supporters of the *first* paradigm.

3. To the reassuring belief of the Enlightenment, according to which it's the *peace* to set up the *natural* condition – and so the *most rational* itself – of the relationship among men (so that, it would be enough to show them the *unnatural madness* of the war because they, at last, decide to renounce this one: cf. Art. "Paix", *Encyclopédie*; Voltaire, s. v. "Guerre", *Dict. philos.*), it is opposed – much more ancient, and after variously accepted in the philosophical tradition – the idea according to which the *war*, instead, is the *normal* condition of mankind (Mori, 1984; Paech, 1990). In the history of western thought there are very few people to disagree with this opinion: in reality, *no one* in the ancient world, and surprisingly *very few* in the modern age, although, since the 16th century, were written several works against war and its excesses (Finley, 1984).

Among the Greeks, the theory that sees in the peace the *temporary* and *artificial* interruption of a *permanent* and *natural* state of war – i.e. anything else that a *temporary* condition of *non-war* – it is universally wide-spread (cf. Keil, 1916; Berve, 1967; Vernant, 1974; Momigliano, 1987; Paech, 1990). Already in Hesiod's *Theogony* (225-26, 901 ff.), under the name of *Éris* (Quarrel), the war is described as a mythical primordial entity. Pre-olimpian divinity, daughter of the night, it belongs to a previous generation compared to *Eiréne* (Peace), towards which it can claim the legitimate priority of a much more ancient right. In Heraclitus – emblematically praised by the traditional titles for Zeus – *Pólemos* (War) symbolizes "the father and the king of everything" (fr.53 DK), so that all happens "according to his right and necessary law" (fr.80 DK).

Generatrix strength, and legislator at the same time, supreme cosmic principle, above Zeus himself, *Pólemos* expresses so, in the same way as *Lógos* (Reason), the eternal and unchanging law of

universal becoming, and it *identifies itself* with *Lógos* (Guthrie, 1962; Capriglione, 1983). Influenced by the Heraclitean thought (Irwin, 1977), Plato himself will confirm the *naturalness*, the *universality*, and the ineluctable *necessity* of war, warning that what men “calling ‘peace’ it’s nothing else a name” (*Leg.* I, 625e -626a).

The classical paradigm of war comes out again, in the modern age, especially with the philosophy of Th. Hobbes. The Christian-jusnaturalistic assumption of a perfect correspondence between the state of nature and the state of peace, reflex of a world’s order rationally in accordance with the divine jurisprudence, in fact Hobbes sets against the Platonic idea (see *Leg.* I, 625e) of *bellum omnium contra omnes*, i.e. a state of nature as a state of permanent and generalized war (*Leviath.* I, XIII-XIV; cf. Brockdorff, 1936). It isn’t so peace, but war, the natural and primary condition – except short and temporary breaks – which characterizes the relationship among men: “the time, which is not war, is peace” (*Elements of Law* XIV, 11; *De cive* I, 12; *Leviath.* I, XIII). Even if it periodically can be recalled or suspended, by the resort to positive rules, war is always, in Hobbes’s opinion, the “disposition clearly hostile” of mankind, alike to the “harmful disposition” of a storm, that persists later when the “showers of hail stopped” (*Leviath.* I, XIII).

Although he is the author of one the most praised eighteenth-century *Projects* about perpetual peace (*Zum ewigen Frieden*, 1795), Kant wasn’t a “pacifist”, at least the current meaning of the word (Gallie, 1978; Duichin, 1991). Unlike to his contemporaries (Saint-Pierre, Voltaire, etc.), in Kant’s opinion war is not, from a philosophical point of view, the result of the *irrational* behavior of men, but the product of an invisible *ratio*. In the *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1790), he not only makes out in war – on condition that it’s led in the respect of civil rights – a manifestation of *the sublime* of the peoples (§ 2), but he finds out in that a kind of ‘ruse of nature’, an expedient through which nature tries to establish peace (§ 83; cf. *Idee z. allgem. Gesch* [1784], §§ 4, 7). In fact, it is through this hidden plan that nature, making use of the *war*, leads men, willy-nilly, to the realization in the sensible world of that *perpetual peace* prescribed by the practical reason as an *ideal precept* (*Kr. Urt.* § 83; *Z. ew. Fr.* II, *Suppl.* I; see also Freud, *Warum Krieg?*, 1932).

To the topic of war, as it’s well known, Hegel too devoted basic pages (cf. Avineri, 1961; Smith, 1965; D’Hondt, 1968; Philonenko, 1969; Verene, 1971; Black, 1973; Cesa, 1976; Rothe-Türde, 1977). A wide-spread interpretation emphasized, above all, the Hegelian assertion about war as “judgement of God”, whose the historical Providence makes use to give the possibility to the Spirit of the World to triumph over. Conceived as mere *justification* of every kind of victorious wars, as events inscribed in the providential plan of the Reason (cf. *Phil. Gesch.* I, II d), this assertion – summarized in the emblematic formula *die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht* (*Enzyklopädie* § 548; *Grundlinien Phil. Rechts* § 340) – was defined by some scholars “a philosophical monstrousness” (Abbagnano, 1971). I have allowed myself to dissent from this point of view.

Hegel, in reality, rejected the Christian and Enlightenment ideas of war as *absolute evil*, or *accident* which founds its *raison d’être* in the passions of The Powerful, in the injustices, etc. (*Grundlinien* § 324). The topic of war, since from his *Theologische Jugendschriften*, it’s always put in close relation to the concept of *freedom*, indissolubly linked to the development of human history (*Grundlinien* § 342). But it couldn’t be *freedom* in the case in which prevails the longing of mere *preservation of life*: so that, the edifying condemnation of the *wickedness* and *irrationality* of war, is only a *dissimulation* of the fear of “the Lordship of Death” (*Phän. Geist.* BB. VI A). This is what betrays, according to Hegel, the pusillanimous ‘pacifism’ of those Christians who, in front of the wide-spread of the barbarians hordes, refused to fight, because of the *proclaimed* religious prohibition to shed human blood; but, *realiter*, they fearfully renounced to *freedom*, to preserve their lives (*Posit. chr. Rel.* 1795/96 = Nohl 1907). In a famous passage from the *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807) – re-echoing the ancient aphorism of Heraclitus: “*Pólemos* makes some men *slaves* and others *free*” (fr.53 DK) – Hegel, in fact, warned that “only bringing the life into play, we can save the freedom” (*Phän. Geist.* B. IV A; cf. Goethe, *Faust* II, Act. V, 11575-6). That freedom – as he will recall again in the last Berlin printed work (1821) – which too many times, in the past, “died for the fear to die” (*Grundlinien* § 324).

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