

CLAUSEWITZ ON KNOWLEDGE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF ON WAR'S EXPLICIT AND IMPLICIT ACCOUNTS OF KNOWLEDGE

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a phenomenological attempt at showing the potential of Clausewitz's On War explicit and implicit explorations on the issues of knowledge, knowledge management and action. The working out of analogies between war and business, drawn in order to gain insight into specific matters, are a practice begun by Clausewitz himself who relied on business notions to explain some details in the functioning of war. This paper moves in this terrain, phenomenologically trying to clarify Clausewitz account of knowledge so that it might serve us in gaining insight into the issue addressed in this conference. In order to open fully the possibilities of Clausewitz's account of the phenomenon of knowledge in individual and collective action, I base ontologically my analysis on Heidegger's phenomenology of humanness, Being and Time. I recall that Heidegger's phenomenological theory describes man, ontologically, as being-in-the-world. We, the beings we ourselves are, are always and already involved in-the-world, caring, choosing, deciding, in short acting. On these ontological grounds, I analyse the way in which Clausewitz works out, explicitly and implicitly, the theme of knowledge, which is based upon three distinct and inter-related aspects: the actual experience of the officer, the embodiment of theory, and the guiding role of policy. Clausewitz account of knowledge relies on the uncovering of the manifold relationships between these three distinct elements. I hope that this paper might be an interesting step into what, I believe, is a highly promise phenomenological approach to knowledge and action in the contemporary organisational world.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is a phenomenological attempt at showing the potential of Clausewitz explicit and implicit explorations on the issues of knowledge, knowledge management and action.

Carl Von Clausewitz's (1976)¹ unfinished magnum opus, *On War*, firstly published in 1832, a year after the author died, is the master-piece that has definitively coined the term strategy. *On War's* influence has been felt up to now not only in politics (e.g., Howard 1976; Lidell-Hart 1967; Ziemke 1994) and the military field (e.g., Bassford 1996; Beyerchen 1992; Handel 1986; WF 1995), but also in management (e.g., Ghyczy, Bassford and Oetinger 2001; Katz 1970; Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, and Lampel 1998; Quinn 1980; Ries and Trout 1986; Vasconcellos e Sá 2001). As a matter of fact, the working out of analogies between war and business, drawn in order to gain insight into specific matters, are a practice begun by Clausewitz (149, 603) himself. Relying on business notions, such as risk, investment, dividend, alliance, deal, and so forth, he tried to explain some details in the functioning of war. This paper moves in this terrain, phenomenologically trying to clarify Clausewitz account of knowledge so that it might serve us in gaining insight into the issue addressed in this conference.

2. A PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

In order to open fully the possibilities of Clausewitz's account of the phenomenon of knowledge in individual and collective action, which although marginal to *On War's* goals is nonetheless rich and promising, I base ontologically my analysis on Heidegger's (1962) phenomenology of humanness. I recall that Heidegger's phenomenological theory describes man, ontologically, as *being-in-the-world*. We, the beings we ourselves are, are always and already involved in the world, caring, choosing, deciding, in short acting.

Heidegger (1962) in *Being and Time* tries to give an account of the world always and already previously experienced by us, before empiricism or intellectualism elaborate any kind of explanations or theories. The world *is* instead of *is not*. Always and already in the world, the beings we ourselves are, are thus revealed as beings-in-the-world.

Man is the kind of being whose essence, what he *is*, is an issue for himself. Thus, *caring* for ourselves and the world, we are essentially *ahead* of ourselves, always and already projecting into the future. In this projecting we are revealed as beings that have been *thrown* into the world, because always with a past and a future in which we are to make something of ourselves. Thus, as a *having been* in-the-world, we care: things matter to us.

Immersed in-the-world we already understand the world and ourselves. As beings-in-the-world we are *with-others*. Most commonly we act, choose, think, live, mainly as *they* do it. Intuitively, we choose, abandon and fulfil the possibilities we open up for ourselves. The having-been that we are and the possibilities in which we are immersed shape ourselves, mould our dispositions, and as such they open up specific possibilities for us in the future.

¹ All references to Clausewitz works are to *On War* (1976) edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, Princeton University Press, USA. Numbers in parenthesis refer to page numbers of this same edition. Italics in direct quotations of Clausewitz are from the original, unless otherwise stated.

The congruence that leads us to repeat what has worked is the instinctive behaviour to maintain ourselves as what we are for ourselves, that is, in *mineness* as a projecting that explicitly or implicitly assumes possibilities for being. Always involved we take stands, choose, and go along with others, on account of the *thrownness* and the projections we are.

Hence, in-the-world, as a projecting having-been, we are grounded in the future. It is the future, the possibilities for being in which we always and already are projecting ourselves that makes us the kind of beings we are. Thus, the future *per se* belongs to the essence of man. In action we are primary directed towards the future; in this directedness we are again directed towards a successful adaptation to our environment, which is something accessed in our own terms, that is, according to our being-ness, or mineness in Heidegger's (1962) phenomenological technical terminology.

A logical and equiprimordial feature of being-in-the-world, as ontological ground, is an assumption that action is primary; that it precedes reflection. In-the-world we are experts in acting. We are always and already acting within our own history against the background of temporality: we are action in structural terms. It is important to note that *being-in* (Heidegger 1962) is formally indicated as a verb, and that a verb is the disclosure of an already in place action because it points to movement, a change, a deed, a result, an action.

The way the world is self-evident is first revealed *as we live in the world*—as we are already going on in our dealings in and with the world. World, firstly and primordially, reveals itself in the background practices in which we dwell. *Being-there* is an embodied understanding of the world in-the-world. The modes of being we encounter in the world—the *ready-to-hand*, that is, the transparency of a thing while we use it, and the *present-at-hand*, that is, the thing as we analyse it and look at it—are founded upon an always and already unfolding acting-in-the-world (Heidegger 1962). The present-at-hand is founded on the primordial ready-to-hand that world as such already is. It is on the basis of a *withdrawn* world, a ready-to-hand background, that something present-at-hand can show itself. Either modes of being presuppose the unfolding of action.

Absorbed in coping in day-to-day activities, a manager, for example, is always acting either appropriating possibilities for being or putting them aside. PCs, mobile phones, desks, cars, books, memos, and other devices—either ready-to-hand or present-at-hand—presuppose a context of action-in-the-world. A manager's dealings in the world constitute the background on which he himself distinguishes any entity. The modes of being of entities he encounters come from his own already acting; not from some specific action, but from himself as action. All the phenomena of data, information, meaning, and knowledge rely on this ground. We are always already involved, acting; the manager as such is the *involved manager* (Introna 1997). The manager is thus action as such, and it is from that perspective that one has to make sense of his acting. Having these ontological grounds, I turn now to Clausewitz account of knowledge.

3. CLAUSEWITZ ACCOUNT OF KNOWLEDGE

Clausewitz's sought to outline the universal, permanent elements in war on the basis of a realistic account of the present and the past. He tried to address the "essence, or regulative idea" (Paret 1976:11) of the phenomenon of war, that is, he was after *the essence* (Husserl 1995; Heidegger 1962; Merleau-Ponty 1962) of war. His method was the logical analysis of

phenomena at stake combined with an account of empirical experience. “Analysis and observation, theory and experience must never disdain or exclude each other; on the contrary, they support each other” (61). In phenomenology no satisfactory essential insight is possible without backing it by specific examples as their intuitive foundation. “Contrary to common belief, essential insight will not lead us to indulging in empty abstractions but to shuttling back and forth between the concrete and the abstract” (Spiegelberg 1975:63). Intuiting essences requires constant reference to concrete examples. Much in a phenomenological manner Clausewitz was not fond of strict definitions as well. His main objective was to address each element of war as sharply as possible yet he insisted on the absence of discrete limits. The breaking up and mathematisation of war will add up to nothing when in the field the general and the army face not “war on paper but real war” (119). Clausewitz’s method is the logical analysis of the phenomena at stake combined with an account of empirical experience. For Clausewitz a theory of any activity, if it aims at effective performance rather than just comprehensive understanding, “must discover the essential, timeless elements of this activity, and distinguish them from its temporary features” (Paret 1976:11). This mode of proceeding is deeply phenomenological.

Clausewitz’s *On War*, I submit in this paper, is fundamentally consistent with Heidegger’s (1962) ontology and with the phenomenological method of investigation. Based on these ontological and epistemological grounds, this paper uncovers Clausewitz account of knowledge, of its development and management. That this has never been done might be understood possibly on the grounds that *On War* usually was studied under Cartesian and Kantian backgrounds. That Clausewitz considered himself a Kantian – throughout *On War* he uses Kant’s (1985) *a priori* features of ‘time’ and ‘space’ to arrange his analysis – might have helped also to favour a not so rigorous approach to his theory of war. This made it difficult fully to grasp some of Clausewitz central notions namely his concept of *friction*, which I will use in this paper in order to get into experience, one of the central elements of Clausewitz account of knowledge. This state of affairs also might explain why, in spite of its having been considered, almost since its publication, a timeless achievement, *On War*’s insights “have not been adequately absorbed” (Brodie 1976:50). In my analysis I show, hopefully, that a phenomenological analysis of *On War*’s has the potential for opening up a relevant account of knowledge and action.

The way in which Clausewitz works out, explicitly and implicitly, the theme of knowledge is based upon three distinct and inter-related aspects: the actual experience of the officer, the embodiment of theory, and the guiding role of policy. His account of knowledge relies on the uncovering of the manifold relationships between these three distinct elements. Let me now turn to Clausewitz account of experience.

3.1. Experience

War is a clash of force, all permeated by material, moral, and psychological factors, by diverse collective and individual objectives and capabilities, by changing perceptions, altogether engulfed by actual and potential extreme violence, and as such the emotions cannot fail to be involved. “Essentially war is fighting” (127), the “element in which it exists is danger” (85), the realm of uncertainty and chance. “The art of war deals with living and moral forces. Consequently it cannot attain the absolute, or certainty; it must always leave a margin for uncertainty” (86). “[A]bsolute, so-called mathematical, factors never find a firm basis in

military calculations. From the very start there is an interplay of possibilities, probabilities, good luck and bad that weaves its way throughout the length and breadth of the tapestry” (ibid.). “Countless minor incidents – the kind you can never really foresee – combine to lower the general level of performance” (119). “Fog can prevent the enemy from being seen in time, a gun from firing when it should, a report from reaching the commanding office. Rain can prevent a battalion from arriving, make another late by keeping it not three but eight hours on the march, ruin a cavalry charge by bogging the horses down in the mud, etc.” (120). “In war more than anywhere else things do not turn out as we expect” (193).

The way fully to understand the nature and the role of knowledge in Clausewitz analysis of war is his novel notion of *friction*. Friction, Clausewitz stressed, mainly comes in individual actions. “A battalion is made of individuals, the least important of whom may chance to delay things or somehow make them go wrong” (119). Clausewitz sustains that actual war cannot be fully grasped without having experienced it, which must account for its essential unpredictability.

This notion of friction, one “that theory can never quite define” (120), is devised to indicate *formally*, that is, to point out the experience one might have of the distinction between real war and war on paper. Friction is not some notion that should be considered or added to a full quantifiable and objective analysis of war. Quite the contrary, friction is a pervading and constant force in war. It characterises it and each of the features of war should be weighted against this distorting, paralysing, and threatening force. Only luck and combat experience can counter the adverse effects of friction. At this point the whole theory of Clausewitz stands as fundamentally consistent with Heidegger’s (1962) ontology. Let us quote a passage concerning how friction can be dealt with effectively:

“[E]very war is rich in unique episodes. Each is an uncharted sea, full of reefs. (...) The good general must know friction in order to overcome it whenever possible, and in order not to expect a standard of achievement in his operations which this very friction makes impossible. Incidentally, it is a force that theory can never quite define. Even if it could, the development of instinct and tact would still be needed, a form of judgement much more necessary in an area littered by endless minor obstacles than in great, momentous questions, which are settled in solitary deliberation or in discussion with others. As with a man of the world instinct becomes almost habit so that he always acts, speaks, and moves appropriately, so only the experienced officer will make the right decision in major and minor matters – at every pulse beat of war. Practice and experience dictate the answer: ‘this is possible, that is not’” (120; our underlining).

The knowledge of friction that Clausewitz considers relevant is ‘instinct and tact’. A general who *knows* friction, in the sense of being capable of dealing with it ‘appropriately’, needs to have made it instinctive, ‘almost habit’. Thus to have knowledge of friction is to have turned it into instinct, into a ready-to-hand entity. It is not enough merely to be familiar with the idea of friction. Effective experience and instinct, that is, to have embodied the notion and subtleties of friction is what counts in real war. That this basic position is fundamentally consistent with the ontology on which this paper is based, is further supported by the fact that Clausewitz appeals to the notion of ‘a man of the world’ – for whom ‘instinct becomes almost habit’ – to explain the kind of ready-to-hand competence that is at stake in dealing effectively with friction. Habit comes from the full and non-thematic constant immersion of man in-the-world. To ‘make the right decision at every pulse beat of war’ accounts for the primacy and transparency of action while relying on a ready-to-hand equipmentability. In this passage,

thus, Clausewitz points to the kind of experience Heidegger (1962) addresses with the notion of being-in-the-world as something fundamental to his theory of war.

Friction is a constant and pervading element of war (119-121). States are shaped by their history as well as by their present circumstances. “The structure of government and military institutions plays a crucial role in the formulation of strategy and its applicability to actual conditions” (Murray et. al 1994:19). States, just as individuals, are thrown into the world, always and already acting with a purpose on account of the circumstances of the present and of the past they embody.

Clausewitz states that the phenomenon of war does not obey any set of rules. Paret (1976:11-2) refers that “[e]ven in his early writing Clausewitz had no difficulty in exposing the inadequacy of prescriptive systems when faced with the infinite resources of the mind and spirit”. The notion that for Clausewitz best approaches the interplay of friction, chance, and victory in war is that of genius, the one ‘who rises above all rules’ (136). Clausewitz acknowledges that every case in war must be considered and thought through in its own right. “His teachings embodied that freedom of thinking (...) [that emphasise] the creative action of the individual and disdain for formalism” (Howard 1976:27). The notions of friction, chance, and genius are central fully to grasp the way in which Clausewitz theorises about war.

Hence, Clausewitz’s immediate answer to counter these contours of the phenomenon of war is *experience* as such – friction would only be mastered and eventually overcome by actual experience. Yet, as one digs deeper into Clausewitz analysis, grounded on an ontology marked by Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, one uncovers the implications of the pervading and constant presence of friction and it becomes distinct how experience is dependent on theory, or, more rigorously, on the kind of embodiment of theory each officer already is while in action.

3.2. Theory

The knowledge that Clausewitz considers most relevant in action is ‘instinct and tact’ (120), as referred to above. I recall that a general *knows* friction in the sense that he is capable of dealing with it ‘appropriately’ (120), making it instinctive, ‘almost habit’ (120). How can this be achieved? Clausewitz points out the role of genius in war – the one “who rise above all rules” (136) –, the innate talents of the mind, and the role of theory in shaping and preparing one for an effective performance in war. He claims that theory might enable one to go beyond first impressions – appearances in the phenomenological sense – into the essence of the phenomena. For Clausewitz a theory of any activity, if it aims at effective performance, “must discover the essential, timeless elements of this activity, and distinguish them from its temporary features” (Paret 1976:11). This is no less than a phenomenological claim on the relevance for action of the mastering of essences.

The whole phenomenon of war, in its dominant tendencies, is for Clausewitz (89) a “paradoxical trinity – composed of primordial violence, hatred, and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force; of the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam; and of its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to reason alone”. In this account one can distinguish fundamental traits in the relationship of strategy and war: war as an instrument of policy is understood within the realms of strategy, which has the dominant role of a ‘rational policy’ shaping and controlling

war; force is the peculiar means of war through which policy is pursued; and, chance, uncertainty, and genius, unveil an addressing of human life as such.

For Clausewitz the psychological, personality, motivational and emotional issues are central in war. He calls them ‘moral issues’ (136, 184-9), not concerning ethics but intellectual and emotional matters in general. The sense of one’s own strength, within the danger in which everything in war moves is the principal factor that influences judgement (137). So “[t]heory becomes infinitely more difficult as soon as it touches the realm of moral values” (137). War is not a mechanical operation. “Architects and painters know precisely what they are about as long as they deal with material phenomena. Mechanical and optical structures are not subject to dispute. But when they come to the aesthetics of their work, when they aim at a particular effect on the mind or on the senses, the rules dissolve into nothing but vague ideas” (136). “[W]ar is not an exercise of the will directed at inanimate matter (...). In war, the will is directed at an animate object that *reacts*” (149). Clausewitz (138) criticises theorists who “are apt to look on fighting in the abstract as a trial of strength without emotion entering into it. This is one of a thousand errors which they quite consciously commit because they have no idea of the implications”. On these accounts Clausewitz (177) claims that strategy has to go onto the field. “[A]ny method by which strategic plans are turned out ready-made, as if from a machine, must be totally rejected” (154):

“The insights gained and garnered by the mind in its wanderings among basic concepts are benefits that theory can provide. Theory cannot equip the kind with formulas for solving problems, nor can it mark the narrow path on which the sole solution is supposed to lie by planting a hedge of principles on either side. But it can give the mind sight into the great mass of phenomena and of their relationships, then leave it free to rise into the higher realms of action. Then the mind can use its innate talents to capacity, combine them all as to seize on what is *right* and *true* as though this were a single idea formed by their concentrated pressure – as though it were a response to the immediate challenge rather than a product of thought” (578; italics from the original).

For Clausewitz the role of a theory is not to establish knowledge as a system of rules, but to enhance the personal capacity and ability of either intuitive or analytical judgment on the most adverse, dangerous and surprising conditions. “Theory exists so that one does not need to start afresh each time sorting out the material and plowing through it, but will find it *ready to hand* and in good order” (141; my italics). A genuine understanding of theory, that is, its embodiment, having turned it into ready-to-hand, might lead to change positively the instinctive and talented dependent behaviour of men. This is Clausewitz’ central message concerning the interplay of theory and experience on the development of knowledge.

3.3. Policy

Relying on instinct and intuition, transparently based on the readiness-to-hand of the army, the weapons, his own experience and theory, the officer, as a being-in-the-world, is already projecting. This ontological projecting grounds the understanding of the course of events and of the possibilities of action. In Clausewitz’s account of war, of the significance of war, that primary ontological projection that man himself is (Heidegger 1962), comes into view as policy. Policy, as an appearance of the primary projection that grounds meaning, opens up the full signification of the battles, of the victories and of the defeats.

The political objective determines the war and its plans. “No one starts a war – or rather, no one in his senses ought to do so – without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it” (579). Bernstein (1994:57) notes that this reasoning of Clausewitz is in agreement with the text of Polybius (2nd century BC): “No sane man goes to war with his neighbours simply for the sake of defeating his opponent... All actions are undertaken for the sake of the consequent pleasure, good, or advantage” (Polybius III, 4, 10-11 in Bernstein 1994:57).

The motive for starting a war is directly grounded on its political objective. The political objective and the scale of means and effort to achieve the political end determine how the war is conducted (579). The character and scope of a war should be determined on the basis of the political probabilities (584). To set how much of our resources should be mobilised for war we must first examine our own political aim and that of the enemy (586). The plans of war and the resources provided for it should underpin the basic political objective, and on the other hand, be governed by the particular characteristics of the country’s position and “conform to the spirit of the age and to its general character” (594).

This apparent linearity between the political objective and the plans of war does not mean, according to Clausewitz, that either the tactics or the strategy of a war should be something clear and linear. Clausewitz’s theory of war differs fundamentally from the established views of the period. He accepts the full consequences of accepting war as a human and social activity. Its inherent tensions, contradictions, chance, and friction warns theory – strategy in Clausewitz (177) words, for this particular aspect – to go into the field. Most matters with which theory is concerned are based on assumptions that may not prove correct. In other cases detailed orders cannot be given in advance. It follows that “the strategist must go on campaign himself. Detailed orders can then be given on the spot, allowing the general plan to be adapted to the modifications that are continuously required” (177). This adaptation aims at achieving the purpose of war. It is this guidance, i.e., policy, which unifies the actions, making them components of a strategy and ascribing them a specific value.

Policy gives the perspective that establishes the relationships between events, phenomena and actions. “Nothing is more important in life than finding the right standpoint for seeing and judging events, and then adhering to it” (606). Clausewitz (180) wrote, when commenting on the resoluteness and boldness of Frederick The Great, that “it required the King’s boldness, resolution, and strength of will *to see things in this way*, and not to be confused and intimidated by the danger that was still being talked and written about thirty years later” (my italics). “One point and *one only* yields an integrated view of all phenomena; and only by holding to that point of view can one avoid inconsistency” (606). Policy is thus a guidance that unifies actions, disclosing their full meaning, and so supporting the creation, development and management of knowledge.

Only when the commander has turned that kind of perspective, that is, all the information that characterises it, into ready-to-hand, that is, into knowledge, would he be able to act consistently, and thus gain the major benefits of a genuine approach to action. Thus, for Clausewitz, knowledge of war – *mutatis mutandis*, I should say knowledge of contemporary business competition – might only aspire being a set of flexible principles ready to adjust to actual circumstances, emphasising the essential and general and leaving scope for the accidental and individual.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The way in which Clausewitz works out the theme of knowledge, as it is phenomenologically analysed in my paper, is intended to add to the clarification of the fundamental notions on which the creation, development and management of knowledge are based. The uncovering on the domain of knowledge within the grounding role of action, of the interplay and unity of the key elements of experience and theory, and of the vital significance of policy might constitute, it is hoped, an interesting contribution for the current debate on the issues addressed in this conference.

I stress that Clausewitz notes that in war everything comes to terms in combat. “The end for which a soldier is recruited, clothed, armed, and trained, the whole object of his sleeping, eating, drinking, and marching *is simply that he should fight at the right place and the right time*” (95). Thus, knowledge *is* already knowledge-for-action. Action as such, as ground, is an *a priori* and essential element of knowledge. Knowledge reveals what it is in action, in which what counts more is experience, ‘instinct and tact’ (120). We repeat what worked, deliberately and instinctively – as “a certain means turns out to be highly effective, it will be used again” (171).

Policy provides the grounding perspective, the background of significance against which the ‘highly effective’ appears as such. Theory has the key role of the development of knowledge, of apprehending information, of understanding it, and turning it into a ready-to-hand entity, embodied in *mineness*. Theory extracts the most out of experience, both of ours and of others. These relationships account for the creation, development and management of knowledge, intended to be effective in such high matters as the conducting of state interests, either in peace or at war.

I hope that this paper might be an interesting step into what I believe is a highly promise phenomenological approach to knowledge and action in the contemporary organisational world. Being theoretically consistent, I should say that the findings of this paper, once found pertinent and appropriate, making sense for us, might intuitively change us and thus affect our action in-the world. Having said that, I hope that in the future, either colleagues or myself might take the findings of this paper, strengthen them, and pursue further research into their empirical relevance and consequences for the many challenges that lie ahead on the issues of knowledge and learning in contemporary organisations.

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