*Review of International Studies* (2025), **51:** 4, 707–725
doi:10.1017/S0260210525000099

RIS

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Towards a phenomenological ontology of war

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(Received 13 May 2024; revised 28 January 2025; accepted 29 January 2025)

**Abstract**

This paper offers a critique of war from an existentialist-phenomenological perspective. Drawing on Martin Heidegger's theory of ontology and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception, it develops a framework which integrates war and the body – and thus ontology and embodiment – in Critical War Studies. Two arguments are advanced: first, that war *is* in so far as we embody it (implying that the way in which we embody it determines the way in which it *is*); second, that the embodiment of war is essentially an agential activity. Thereby, this paper provides impetus for an ontological and moral re-avowal of war in critical academic discourse (for understanding war not primarily as a tragic fate but as our shameful doing). This, in turn, facilitates new perspective for interpretation and critique – to the extent, for example, that understanding the logic of war's agential embodiment discloses what would constitute, and be necessary for, its disembodiment. Moreover, the paper points to clear possibilities for future research – for clarifying, for instance, the ontological upheaval latent in the prospect of future war.

**Keywords:** agency; embodiment; Heidegger; Merleau-Ponty; ontology of war; phenomenology

> 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*
> Martin Heidegger, 1927[1]

## Introduction

As children, we discover *that war is* (before, indeed, we really know *what* it is). It is as if, for children – beings which do not yet understand the possibilities inherent in their own being – war might not have been. But it *is*; and where it *is not* (in the form of here and now, or somewhere and somewhen), it *is* as both an historical legacy we inherit in virtue of 'civilised' existence and, more fundamentally, an ever-impending possibility in virtue of social existence. This, I suggest in this paper, is not so much tragic, as if war were an exogenous fate or organised by the gods, but shameful – shameful because war is our doing. In short, war *is* because we embody it.

Theoretically implied here are the notions of ontology and embodiment. Over the last two decades, scholars have developed these notions as dominant conduits for the critical study of war.

[1]Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001 [1927]), p. 60 [35], original emphasis (page numbers in brackets refer to the eighth edition of the German text; see translator's discussion at Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 15).

Ontologically, war has been re-problematised both in itself and as an object of study,[2] leading to the establishment of a field of Critical War Studies (CWS).[3] Meanwhile, a 'corporeal turn' has rightfully placed the human body back at the centre of the study of war, exploring myriad ways in which the human being embodies the being of war.[4] Given these parallel and interrelated developments, it is unsurprising that some theorists have turned to phenomenology,[5] a philosophical method uniquely equipped to integrate ontology and embodiment. This turn, however, remains either nascent and propositional[6] or, as I show below, misleadingly narrow in its application; consequently, its methodological potential to integrate these terms has not been realised. Moreover, from a phenomenological perspective I identify a broader problem in this critical literature, namely, a tendency to characterise war as a tragic (inescapable and exogenous) fate; this literature, in turn, is often characterised by a normative pessimism (potentially undermining the emancipatory purpose of critical discourse). Drawing on the work of Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, I counter this trend by developing a framework which foregrounds the culpable human *agent* of war. Substantively, this involves shifting the focus from the hitherto-dominant ontological question *What is war* (a question I put aside in this paper) to what I argue are more foundational ontological questions, namely *Whence is war, How is war* (by which I mean not *What is war like* but *How is it that war is*), and *Why is war*.[7] Besides establishing a basis for clarifying the *What* question, these questions offer new perspective for understanding and critiquing war more generally; moreover, they facilitate a much-needed re-avowal of war in critical academic discourse.

Through this framework, I advance two main arguments. First, I outline a foundational ontological argument that war *is* in so far as we embody it (whether as a possibility or an actuality); this implies that the manner in which we embody war determines the way in which it *is*. In brief: *war is qua embodiment*. I arrive at this argument by integrating Heidegger's conception of the human being as that from which all ontic structures (hence, *war*) necessarily emerge with Merleau-Ponty's rejoinder that 'existence [necessarily] accomplishes itself in the body'.[8] In this ontological argument, as such, the *What, Whence*, and *How* of war are integrated – for whatever war *is*, it *is* in virtue of its being in, through, and between human bodies which project it forth into *Being*. Second, I probe the agency – and, by implication, responsibility – entailed in war's embodiment by arguing that war *is* in so far as human beings *agentially* embody it. This is not to deny the constraints of his-

[2]E.g. Anthony Burke, 'Ontologies of war: Violence, existence and reason', *Theory & Event*, 10:2 (2007), no pagination; Tarak Barkawi and Shane Brighton, 'Powers of war: Fighting, knowledge, and critique', *International Political Sociology*, 5:2 (2011), pp. 126–43.

[3]Shane Brighton, 'Critical War Studies', in Jenny Edkins (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Critical International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 129–42.

[4]E.g. Christine Sylvester, *Experiencing War* (London: Routledge, 2011); Kevin McSorley (ed.), *War and the Body: Militarisation, Practice and Experience* (London: Routledge, 2013).

[5]The following, for example, all draw on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology: John Hockey, '"Switch on": Sensory work in the infantry', *Work, Employment and Society*, 23:3 (2009), pp. 477–93; Caroline Holmqvist, 'Undoing war: War ontologies and the materiality of drone warfare', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 41:3 (2013), pp. 535–52; Kevin McSorley, 'Doing military fitness: Physical culture, civilian leisure, and militarism', *Critical Military Studies*, 2:1–2 (2016), pp. 103–19.

[6]E.g. Shane Brighton, 'Three propositions on the phenomenology of war', *International Political Sociology*, 5 (2011), pp. 101–5.

[7]Cf. Harmonie Toros, Joe Gazeley, Alex Guirakhoo, Lucie Merian and Yasmeen Omran, '"Where is war? We are war": Teaching and learning the human experience of war in the classroom', *International Studies Perspectives*, 19:3 (2018), pp. 199–217. *Whence* (rather than *Where*), however, offers nuance appropriate to the existentialist-phenomenological framework developed below. The *How*/*Why* questions are of course the concern of causal-positivist analyses; my focus, however, is not on *causes* of war but on the processual-existential *conditions for its possibility*.

[8]Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 32 [12]. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (London: Routledge, 2012 [1945]), p. 169.

tory; I emphasise, rather, that 'structure' ultimately owes its existence to embodiment, and that embodiment, in turn, entails freedom – not that of momentary and abstract decisions of will, but a hermeneutic freedom of *taking up* a tradition of war that history *hands down*.[9] In this argument, therefore, the *Why* question is intergraded with the *What, Whence*, and *How* questions: war *is*, most fundamentally, because *we choose it*.[10]

The main contribution of this paper is to integrate war and the body in CWS by dialectically conceiving a free and accountable subject within war's confining structures. This re-avowal of war, in turn, facilitates a normative optimism through the implication of our individual and collective agency to disembody war. Methodologically, I thereby advocate for a more sustained application of phenomenology to the study of war – a remarkable omission hitherto.[11] Moreover, I maintain that phenomenology should not be understood as incommensurable with other critical methods in CWS but as existing in a creative tension; herein lay this paper's more nuanced contributions. In dialogue with post-structuralism (as the dominant frame of critique in CWS),[12] for example, I show that a phenomenological approach avoids the risk of hypostatising the structure of war by grounding discursive/symbolic 'power' in the condition for its possibility, namely, agential human being; in dialogue with post-humanist theorising,[13] meanwhile, I show that phenomenology simultaneously undermines problematic dualisms (post-humanism's essential agenda) while preserving the responsible agent at the heart of war's occurrence.[14] Here emerges a particular philosophical commitment of this phenomenological approach, namely its humanist/anthropocentric premises. I contend, however, that such an ontological elevation of the human is indispensable for an appropriate ethical responsiveness.[15] As such, this paper also offers a notion of 'embodiment' which differs from the way the term is often used in CWS. As a methodological injunction, 'embodiment' is understood here not primarily as something bodies suffer but *do*: to 'embody war' is the agential-existential process of constitutively 'taking up' the possibility and tradition of war. More broadly, this paper contributes to a growing interest in the relevance

[9]The notion of agentially 'taking up' [*reprenant*] history is Merleau-Ponty's (*Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 476); the notion of a 'tradition' 'handed down' is Hans-Georg Gadamer's (*Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd ed. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2004 [1960]), p. 296.

[10]I am exclusively concerned with *human* war. This is not to claim that other earthy (or extra-terrestrial) creatures do/could not engage in 'warfare'; as zoologists (e.g. Jane Goodall, *The Chimpanzees of Gombe: Patterns of Behavior* [Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1986]) have shown, for example, chimpanzees engage in a type of 'organised violence' which fits with many basic criteria offered for defining war (i.e. reciprocal hostile intentions/actions between groups). Rather, I emphasise that *human war* is a distinctively *human phenomenon* which must be problematised at the level of *human ontology*.

[11]Given the significance of phenomenology in Western thought and the normative urgency that war poses, it is indeed remarkable that there has been no substantive and sustained phenomenology of war hitherto. 'Violence' – an overlapping but essentially distinct object of analysis – has, however, received considerable phenomenological attention (e.g. Michael Staudigl (ed.), *Phenomenologies of Violence* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2014); James Dodd, *Phenomenological Reflections on Violence: A Skeptical Approach* (London: Routledge, 2017).

[12]For a critical discussion, see Tanya Narozhna, 'The lived body, everyday and generative powers of war: Toward an embodied ontology of war as experience', *International Theory*, 14:2 (2021), pp. 1–23 (pp. 7–9).

[13]Esp. Lauren Wilcox, 'Embodying algorithmic war: Gender, race, and the posthuman in drone warfare', *Security Dialogue*, 48:1 (2017), pp. 11–28; Italo Brandimarte, 'Breathless war: Martial bodies, aerial experiences and the atmospheres of empire', *European Journal of International Relations*, 29:3 (2023), pp. 525–52.

[14]On Heidegger's key role in the development of post-humanist thought, see Gavin Rae, 'Heidegger's influence on posthumanism: The destruction of metaphysics, technology and the overcoming of anthropocentrism', *History of the Human Sciences*, 27:1 (2014), pp. 51–69.

[15]Cf., Audra Mitchell, 'Only human? A worldly approach to security', *Security Dialogue*, 45:1 (2014), pp. 5–21 (p. 6). On the humanism/anthropocentricism that follows from Heidegger's ontology, see Martin Heidegger's 'Letter on humanism' [1947], in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell, trans. Frank A. Capuzzi and J. Glenn Gray, revised, expanded ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), pp. 213–66.

of Heidegger in particular,[16] and existentialism more broadly,[17] to International Relations (IR) theorising.

The paper is structured as follows. The first half situates this phenomenological ontology of war within the broader CWS literature on ontology and embodiment. The second half then develops the main framework. This comprises three subsections which: (1) interpret the existence of war through Heidegger's fundamental ontology; (2) draw on Merleau-Ponty to show that war's existence necessarily manifests through embodiment; and (3) show that, in a methodologically and normatively important sense, embodiment entails agency (and therefore responsibility). The conclusion reflects briefly on how phenomenology might be advanced in CWS vis-à-vis conceiving *What* war is, theorising and realising 'peace', and anticipating the impending ontological upheaval occasioned by rapidly evolving technologies of war.

## Critical War Studies: Towards a phenomenological ontology

Even amid the good fortune of peace, we nevertheless encounter war in the course of our everyday lives. I, for instance, currently dwell in as peaceful a time and place as humanity has ever known; yet, I frequently encounter war – externally through mediums such as art and reportage, more actively in the course of a conversation about this or that war in some other time and place, as well as inwardly through my memory and imagination. Recently, for example, I have been reading an autobiography, and a small episode of the author's life concerns trench warfare during the First World War. Having previously 'forgotten' war – being instead consumed by the intensity of the everyday – it subtly yet suddenly struck me anew, both as an existential possibility and as a reality (albeit elsewhere). This 'encounter' was between *Me*, a conscious, embodied being, and *War*, a possible ontic phenomenon, structure of collective life, and way of being. In and through this 'encounter', I embodied war; or rather, the 'encounter' – as the event of my being – was constituted as my embodying war.[18]

As noted above, CWS scholars have paved the way to making sense of these logics, especially over the last two decades through what can be understood as ontological and corporeal 'turns' in the literature. In this section, I offer a reading of these turns which highlights a logical (and somewhat substantive) convergence towards both the argument and method of this paper. Thus, I read the ontological turn as tending towards a recognition that war is essentially embodied, and the corporeal turn, conversely, as tending towards a recognition of war's ontogenetic (generative) nature. I do not claim this is the only – or even the most representative – reading of this literature, only that it is particularly valid and insightful (granting the validity of my argument, of course). I begin, in the first subsection, by outlining the story of this convergence. I then offer (in the second subsection) a critique of two otherwise-promising examples from the respective turns

[16]E.g. Gerard Van Der Ree, 'Being-in-the-world of the international', *Review of International Studies*, 41:4 (2015), pp. 781–98; Bahar Rumelili, '[Our] age of anxiety: Existentialism and the current state of International Relations', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 24:4 (2021), pp. 1020–36. For a critical view, see Andrew R. Hom, 'Heidegger's heritage: The temporal politics of authenticity, then and now', *Review of International Studies*, 49:5 (2023), pp. 885–904.

[17]Jelena Subotić and Filip Ejdus, 'Towards the existentialist turn in IR: Introduction to the symposium on anxiety', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 24:4 (2021), pp. 1014–19; Andrew R. Hom and Cian O'Driscoll, 'Existentialism and International Relations: In it up to our necks', *Review of International Studies,* 49:5 (2023), pp. 783–94.

[18]I should, perhaps, also disclose my positionality in relation to this research. In particular, I previously embodied war in a much more active and extreme sense: I was a regular member of the British Royal Marines between 2005 and 2012, trained as a sniper, and 'served' twice in Afghanistan, among other places. War, therefore, was once my *voluntary* doing; for this I bear responsibility (of a kind I theoretically elaborate below). To be sure, this experience is not meant to validate any argument/interpretation I make (indeed, I relate to this memory as one might relate to an autobiography; and I believe it possesses a similar methodological validity). Moreover, although such actions might essentialise the embodiment of war, this paper is concerned with 'the embodiment of war' in a much more general (existentialist) sense. Thus, I am not seeking to *explain* war (in terms of the *why* and *significance* of someone's participation) but to interpret the *being of war* – as both a possibility and an actuality. This should become clear in the second half of this paper.

in order to highlight certain ontological and normative presuppositions which – through a disavowal of agency – have ultimately impeded the methodological integration of war and the body in CWS. As we will see in the following section, agency is the necessary medium of the ontogenesis of war.

### *Ontological and corporeal 'turns': Converging paths*

In the spirit of the philosophy which grounds this paper, I begin with ontology. The re-invigoration of the ontology of war began, most significantly, in 2011 with a series of sole-/co-authored articles by Tarak Barkawi and Shane Brighton.[19] In a sole-authored article, Barkawi outlines the problem a CWS – which centres around an ontology of war – would solve.[20] In short, the academy, most notably the social sciences, shifted focus to a 'wider agenda' of 'peace and security', thereby neglecting the notions of force and war. This was especially the case in IR – that discipline which, as Barkawi notes, should arguably centre around the critical study of war.[21] Instead, Barkawi observes, IR came to study 'things like the incidence of war in the international system, the causes of war, crisis decision-making, the dynamics of alliances and so on, none of which are the same object of analysis as "war"'.[22] This is particularly problematic, as Barkawi notes, given that we live 'in a world made in no small measure by ongoing histories of organised violence'.[23] If objects such as economics and sustainable development can constitute their own disciplines, why not war – that object which, especially since the advent of weapons of mass destruction, poses the gravest existential threat to humanity?

The same year, Barkawi and Brighton published an influential article in which they elaborate the problem (that 'the most basic questions regarding the ontology and epistemology of war have hardly been asked')[24] and then propose their own solution, namely a Foucauldian/Clausewitzian ontology of war which illuminates the relationship between war's interior (the fighting by which it is characterised) and its societal/political effects (i.e. that which it *generates*). Thus, 'fighting' is *ontogenetic* in that it produces an 'excess' beyond the acute kinetic exchange of a clash of arms.[25] The main implication of this reasoning is provocatively summed up in their opening phrase: 'While destructive, war is a generative force like no other.'[26] This reasoning is provocative because it problematises a method of critique which ontologically construes war as exclusively destructive and meaningless.[27] Critics of Barkawi and Brighton's have indeed focused on this provocation, accusing them of peddling an ancient myth[28] and of reifying war in academic discourse.[29] In this paper, I agree with

[19] See note 2 above. This 'turn' was notably anticipated by Burke, 'Ontologies of war'.

[20] Tarak Barkawi, 'From war to security: Security studies, the wider agenda and the fate of the study of war', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 39:3 (2011), pp. 701–16.

[21] Barkawi, 'From war to security', p. 702.

[22] Barkawi, 'From war to security', p. 704.

[23] Barkawi, 'From war to security', p. 704.

[24] Barkawi and Brighton, 'Powers of war', p. 127.

[25] Cf. Ilan Zvi Baron, Jonathan Havercroft, Isaac Kamola, et al., 'Liberal pacification and the phenomenology of violence', *International Studies Quarterly*, 63:1 (2019), pp. 199–212 (p. 202), who have recently applied Heideggerian notions to understanding the 'generative' nature of violence in terms of its 'restructur[ing] the social and political world'.

[26] Barkawi and Brighton, 'Powers of war', p. 126.

[27] The pacifist-theoretical agenda would of course be simpler if 'war' were exclusively destructive and horrific. Cf. William James's provocative argument that war cannot be beaten by counter-insistency on its horror, because too often the horror makes the thrill (William James, 'The moral equivalent of war' [1910], in *The Works of William James*, Electronic Edition, vol. Volume 11: *Essays in Religion and Morality* (Charlottesville, VA: InteLex Corp, 2008), pp. 163–73. We have here, therefore, a 'realist pacifism' to which this paper may be understood as contributing.

[28] Jens Bartelson, *War in International Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[29] Astrid H. M. Nordin and Dan Öberg, 'Targeting the ontology of war: From Clausewitz to Baudrillard', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 43:2 (2015), pp. 392–410; Henrique Tavares Furtado, 'Critique of ontological militarism', *International Political Sociology*, 17:3 (2023), pp. 1–17.

Barkawi and Brighton that these concerns are exaggerated and misplaced,[30] and I aim to develop their central insight about ontogenesis through a phenomenological ontology which grounds war in agential embodiment. Moreover, I will argue that phenomenological ontology overcomes an untenable consequence of their Foucauldian/Clausewitzian framework, namely its disavowal of the *human* body and the resulting hypostatisation of war.

Barkawi and Brighton's call for a critical ontology of war has been significantly answered; ontology is now seen as a valid principle of enquiry, and there is the growing basis for a field of CWS. One aspect of this emerging literature has focused on further problematising the relationship between war itself and war as an object of knowledge. Notably, Bousquet, Grove, and Shah have advanced Barkawi and Brighton's observation about 'war's recalcitrance as an object of knowledge':[31] since 'every attempt to conceptually shackle war is undone by the creative advance of its new modes, residences, and intensities', Bousquet et al. suggest that we need a 'strange, paradoxical and provisional ontology that is consonant with the confounding mutability of war'.[32] They then propose a 'martial empiricism' – not so much a theory but 'a style of investigation that encompasses both the enduring cohesion and the radical dispersion of war' and which underscores the need for a *processual* ontology centring on *becoming* rather than *being*.[33] From here, it follows that the object of ontology (i.e. *war*) is not static and timeless but continually emerging from a continuous present; moreover, that embodied experience (agential or not) is the pivot of this emergence.[34]

This convergence between ontology and the body/experience has been recognised in the literature. Through her inquiry into human-material assemblages in war (particularly drone warfare), for example, Holmqvist follows Barkawi and Brighton in 're-centr[ing] questions of ontology to the study of war' but argues that the most important object of such an ontology is the human being.[35] Holmqvist also suggests that this renewed ontology of war leads to considerations of agency (although she proposes a notion of agency couched in 'the agentic capacity of matter'[36] – a position I oppose below). Moreover, Wilcox – drawing on Judith Butler's critical ontology – suggests that understanding war as a generative force 'requires that we consider how bodies are enabling and generative of war and practices of political violence'.[37] Similarly, Dyvik and Greenwood begin their special issue on *Embodying Militarism* by explicitly establishing the methodological link between 'exploring the embodied experiences of … war' and Barkawi and Brighton's notion of war's 'generative capacity'.[38] To appreciate the promise and limitations of this convergence, I now shift tracks to consider the corporeal turn in CWS on its own terms.

Like the ontological turn, the corporeal turn began with a critique of the 'traditional' war studies literature. The problem with this literature was recognised some time ago by literary

[30]Intellectual ideas of course have an effect on history (as Barkawi and Brighton concede), yet this effect should not be exaggerated for the primary reason that war exceeds thought about war; see Tarak Barkawi and Shane Brighton, 'Concepts and histories of war', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 48:1 (2019), pp. 99–104.

[31]Barkawi and Brighton, 'Powers of war', p. 133.

[32]Antoine Bousquet, Jairus Grove, and Nisha Shah, 'Becoming war: Towards a martial empiricism', *Security Dialogue*, 51:2–3 (2020), pp. 99–118 (p. 100). Bousquet has also defended and developed the notion of ontogenesis in war studies; see Antoine Bousquet, 'In defence of ontogenesis and for a general ecology of war', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 48:1 (2019), pp. 70–8; Antoine Bousquet, 'War as becoming', in Tim Sweijs and Jeffrey H. Michaels (eds), *Beyond Ukraine: Debating the Future of War* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2024), pp. 329–48.

[33]Bousquet, Grove, and Shah, 'Becoming war', p. 101.

[34]See also Christopher McIntosh, 'Theorizing the temporal exception: The importance of the present for the study of war', *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 5:4 (2020), pp. 543–58.

[35]Holmqvist, 'Undoing war', p. 552.

[36]Holmqvist, 'Undoing war', p. 552.

[37]Lauren B. Wilcox, *Bodies of Violence: Theorizing Embodied Subjects in International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 3.

[38]Synne L. Dyvik and Lauren Greenwood, 'Embodying militarism: Exploring the spaces and bodies in-between', *Critical Military Studies*, 2:1–2 (2016), pp. 1–6 (p. 1).

scholar Elain Scarry. She documents at length how, despite war being 'the most radically embodying event in which human beings ever collectively participate', the actual human body tended to be omitted in both academic and popular discourses on war.[39] Despite Scarry's writing in 1985, however, it took more than two decades before a corporeal turn in war studies would materialise; thus, sociologist McSorley could still observe in 2014 that 'the intertwining of war and the body has … 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'.[40] In the years since, this omission has been somewhat corrected, notably by feminist scholars.[41] Equipped with methodological tools developed through theoretically foregrounding particularly women's embodied experiences in war,[42] feminist scholars have problematised the omission of the body from the larger discourse on war and underscored the essential validity of its inclusion. A prominent example has been the work of Sylvester who, writing from an IR perspective, challenged her discipline to turn from the concepts through which it had traditionally studied war (i.e. states, militaries, strategies, conventional security issues, weapons, etc.) to instead theorise war 'from the starting point of individuals, the ones who experience war in the myriad ways possible – as combatants, casualties, voyeurs, opponents, artists, healers, grave diggers, and so many other identities'.[43] A central premise of this turn, Sylvester notes, would be that 'understanding people's experiences with/in war is essential for understanding war'.[44]

Since Sylvester's challenge to IR, the corporeal turn in war studies has achieved a considerable cross-disciplinary status, and the sources and methods deemed valid for interpreting war have likewise diversified remarkably. Anthropologists, for example, have underscored the relevance of experience for broader understanding;[45] critical geographers have explored the complex interactions between space and the body/experience in war;[46] and sociologists and political scientists have increasingly problematised micro-experiential phenomena – ranging from senses to emotional states to narrative understanding – for understanding macro-phenomena.[47] In terms of sources/methods, the broader political/socio-cultural significance of embodied experiences of

[39]Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 71.

[40]Kevin McSorley, 'Towards an embodied sociology of war', *The Sociological Review*, 62 (2014), pp. 107–28 (p. 112); see also Hockey, '"Switch on"'.

[41]For an overview, see Christine Sylvester, 'War experiences/war practices/war theory', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 40:3 (2012), pp. 483–503 (p. 490, note 30).

[42]E.g. Dubravka Žarkov, *The Body of War: Media, Ethnicity, and Gender in the Break-Up of Yugoslavia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Swati Parashar, 'Feminist International Relations and women militants: Case studies from Sri Lanka and Kashmir', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 22:2 (2009), pp. 235–56; Miranda Alison, *Women and Political Violence: Female Combatants in Ethno-national Conflict* (London: Routledge, 2009).

[43]Sylvester, 'War experiences/war practices/war theory', p. 483; Cf. Christine Sylvester, 'Experiencing war: An introduction', in Christine Sylvester (ed.), *Experiencing War* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 1–7 (p. 1).

[44]Christine Sylvester, *War as Experience: Contributions from International Relations and Feminist Analysis* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 1.

[45]E.g. Kenneth MacLeish, 'Ethnography and the embodied life of war-making', in Alison J. Williams, Neil Jenkings, Rachel Woodward, Matthew F. Rech (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Military Research Methods* (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 219–30; Zoë H. Wool, 'On movement: The matter of US soldiers' being after combat', *Ethnos*, 78:3 (2013), pp. 403–33.

[46]E.g. Derek Gregory, 'Eyes in the sky – bodies on the ground', *Critical Studies on Security*, 6:3 (2018), pp. 347–58. For an overview, see Matthew Rech, Daniel Bos, K. Neil Jenkings, Alison Williams, Rachel Woodward, 'Geography, military geography, and critical military studies', *Critical Military Studies*, 1:1 (2015), pp. 47–60.

[47]Swati Parashar, 'What wars and "war bodies" know about international relations', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 26:4 (2013), pp. 615–30; Julia Welland, 'Joy and war: Reading pleasure in wartime experiences', *Review of International Studies*, 44:3 (2018), pp. 438–55; Kevin McSorley, 'Sensate regimes of war: Smell, tracing and violence', *Security Dialogue*, 51:2–3 (2020), pp. 155–73; Nick Caddick, 'Life, embodiment, and (post-)war stories: Studying narrative in critical military studies', *Critical Military Studies*, 7:2 (2021), pp. 155–72.

war has been examined through mediums such as (*inter alia*) memoirs,[48] photography,[49] tattoos,[50] conversational dialogues with veterans,[51] and material objects.[52] Meanwhile, feminist scholars have continued to emphasise that both experience and its sources, as well as the researcher's interpretation of those experiences/sources, are always socially/politically embedded.[53]

In terms of the phenomenological-ontological analysis advanced below, one particularly relevant theoretical development is the post-humanist problematisation of the relationship between the human body and rapidly evolving technologies of war. Wilcox, for example, has challenged the notion of a zero-sum trade-off between human sovereignty and technology, arguing – through the case of 'drone assemblages' – that military technology is oppressively 'corporealising' in terms of racial and gendered structures.[54] Similarly, Brandimarte explores the relationship between experiences of aerial warfare (in the context of Fascist Italy) and the constitution of racialised global orders.[55] Through his characterisation of aerial warfare as 'more-than-human', however, Brandimarte seems to depart from a post-humanist perspective into a *trans*-humanist one; to this extent, he seems to contradict Wilcox's point that advanced military technologically is 'corporealising'. Phenomenological ontology, I suggest, can clarify these distinctions and notions. For example, in opposition to Brandimarte's position that 'a humanist theorisation of experience obscures fundamental logics and processes behind the institution of colonial war and world politics as a racial formation',[56] I contend that humanism is in need of critique, not rejection – that only through a recognition that technologically advanced warfare is *our* (distinctively *human*) doing might we effectively harness the normative potential of our agency to banish it (along with its concomitant structures) as our wrongdoing.

In light of this extant literature, it is clear that the corporeal turn in war studies methodologically presupposes an ontology of war (or at least a conceptualisation of that which is embodied). Above, I offered some examples in the literature of scholars who have recognised this. I argue in this paper that phenomenological ontology is *uniquely* equipped to methodologically integrate these notions and ground war – conceptually and ontologically – in embodied experience. This has also been explicitly recognised in the literature. Sylvester, for example, proposed a phenomenological intervention as a way of avoiding a reductive understanding of war which focuses on injury;[57] Brighton, meanwhile, introduces phenomenology as a means to understand war's generative logics.[58] In the rest of this section, I aim to clarify the contribution phenomenological ontology has

[48]Rachel Woodward and K. Neil Jenkings, 'Soldiers' bodies and the contemporary British military memoir', in Kevin McSorley (ed.), *War and the Body* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 152–64; Synne L. Dyvik, '"Valhalla rising": Gender, embodiment and experience in military memoirs', *Security Dialogue*, 47:2 (2016), pp. 133–50.

[49]Mark Gilks, 'The aesthetic influences of war: A phenomenology of Tim Hetherington's "feedback loop"', *Journal of War & Culture Studies*, 17:1 (2024), pp. 7–27.

[50]Synne L. Dyvik and Julia Welland, 'War ink: Sense-making and curating war through military tattoos', *International Political Sociology*, 12:4 (2018), pp. 346–61; Mirko Palestrino, 'Inking wartime: Military tattoos and the temporalities of the war experience', *International Political Sociology*, 16:3 (2022), pp. 1–20.

[51]Sarah Bulmer and David Jackson, '"You do not live in my skin": Embodiment, voice, and the veteran', *Critical Military Studies*, 2:1–2 (2016), pp. 25–40; Sophy Antrobus, Sarah Bulmer, Nick Caddick, Hannah West, 'Voices of veteran researchers', *Critical Military Studies*, 9:1 (2023), pp. 1–4.

[52]Joanna Tidy, 'War craft: The embodied politics of making war', *Security Dialogue*, 50:3 (2019), pp. 220–38.

[53]Joanna Tidy, 'Visual regimes and the politics of war experience: Rewriting war "from above" in Wikileaks' "collateral murder"', *Review of International Studies*, 43:1 (2017), pp. 95–111; Synne L. Dyvik, 'Of bats and bodies: Methods for reading and writing embodiment', *Critical Military Studies*, 2:1–2 (2016), pp. 56–69.

[54]Wilcox, 'Embodying algorithmic war'.

[55]Brandimarte, 'Breathless war'.

[56]Brandimarte, 'Breathless war', p. 528. Cf. Matthew Leep, 'Introduction to the Special Issue: Multispecies security and personhood', *Review of International Studies*, 49:2 (2023), pp. 181–200.

[57]Sylvester, 'War experiences/war practices/war theory', p. 497.

[58]Brighton, 'Three propositions on the phenomenology of war'.

yet to make to CWS through a critique of two case studies from the literature. The first is an article by Narozhna which, as an outgrowth of the corporeal turn, represents the most explicit attempt to date to conceive a phenomenological ontology of war.[59] The second is Barkawi and Brighton's Foucauldian/Clausewitzian ontology of war. Despite their methodological and theoretical promise, I show that in each case war is ultimately disavowed. I offer these critiques as a (somewhat-representative) illustration of how certain normative and theoretical presuppositions can undermine the integration of war and the body in CWS.

### *The disavowal of war in CWS*

In her phenomenology of the embodiment of war, Narozhna begins by outlining the limitations of both the ontological and corporeal turns in the literature. While the ontological turn construes war as disembodied, the corporeal turn, specifically in feminist IR war studies, has not yet offered a 'sustained ontological investigation of war as embodied experience'.[60] 'Taking the task of theorizing embodied experience of war seriously', Narozhna writes, 'means that we must treat the core concept of a body as the ontological starting point for understanding the relationship between corporeal experiences and war.'[61] For this, she proposes Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology.

Despite the broad promise of her initial agenda to conduct an existentialist phenomenology of the embodied experience of war, however, Narozhna is in fact exclusively concerned with the embodied experience of an effect of war, specifically injury; war itself, meanwhile, is reduced – borrowing a phrase from Sylvester – to a 'politics of injury' which is inherently and exclusively destructive.[62] While, for example, Narozhna begins by employing phenomenology to holistically conceptualise people as possessing the potential for agency and meaning-making, and as being able to embody social identities and roles, she argues that war destroys all of these abilities. It is of course true that war can and often does disrupt all of life's modes (and phenomenology can certainly inform us about this); yet, with war reduced to an inherently and exclusively 'alienating' and 'disruptive' phenomenon,[63] Narozhna effectively sells short phenomenology by implying it would have nothing to say about how war facilitates and can be an expression of agency, how it generates meaning (for some), and how it creates communities and occasions the opportunity for meaningful intersubjective encounters. She writes, for instance, that war 'disconnects [people] from their pre-war identities',[64] but nothing is said of the identities war might generate – let alone how such identities may be more meaningful than pre-war identities. Furthermore, the overarching normative-ontological commitment that war is categorically destructive of meaning leads Narozhna to obscure any difference of perspective. Thus, she categorises together perpetrator, observer, and victim in the same theoretical frame when she writes: '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.'[65] As such, no distinction is offered between *choosing* to embody war (whether in the mundane 'everyday' or in acute outbreaks) and embodying war through violent imposition.

Narozhna's disavowal of the *agent in* war results – by logical implication – in a disavowal of war itself. Indeed, within the scope of Narozhna's framing, war is not something that humans *do* but that

[59]Narozhna, 'The lived body, everyday and generative powers of war'.

[60]Narozhna, 'The lived body, everyday and generative powers of war', pp. 2–3.

[61]Narozhna, 'The lived body, everyday and generative powers of war', p. 3.

[62]Sylvester, 'War experiences/war practices/war theory', p. 493.

[63]One of the main influences here is Elaine Scarry, who understands the 'structure of war' as a 'structure of unmaking' – it is an '[act] of destruction (and hence somehow the opposite of creation)', 'the suspension of civilization (and somehow the opposite of that civilisation)' (Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, pp. 12, 21).

[64]Narozhna, 'The lived body, everyday and generative powers of war', p. 16.

[65]Narozhna, 'The lived body, everyday and generative powers of war', p. 15.

is *done to* human agents; it is, as such, an exogenous and essentially inhuman force which befalls humanity. In some sense, the underlying limitation of Narozhna's existentialist phenomenology is that she fails to theoretically integrate it with Barkawi and Brighton's basic insight that war is not only destructive but inherently generative; as I now show, however, Barkawi and Brighton's Foucauldian/Clausewitzian framework has the same untenable implication as Narozhna's, though for different reasons.

From the phenomenological perspective advanced in this paper, the problem with Barkawi and Brighton's Foucauldian/Clausewitzian framework is that the body is largely absent, and when it does come into view it is a docile entity which succumbs to the ontogenetic forces of an epistemic power – what they term 'War/Truth' – beyond its control.[66] Drawing on Emmanuel Levinas, for example, the body is not spoken of as *doing* war but as being 'cast into movement' by war.[67] This disavowal of the *doing* body is rooted in a disavowal of agency, and this disavowal, in turn, 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 … 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.'[68] I contend, however, that this is an overly reductive ontology of war in that it brushes over the lived experience of those who participate in war. To make this point, it is necessary to distinguish between *strategic certitude* (i.e. the ability to predict outcomes in war and the kind Clausewitz theorised), on the one hand, and *existential certitude*, on the other. As I argue below, ontologically more fundamental than the ability to predict/determine outcomes (*strategic certitude*) is the striving for *existential certitude* which defines experience/behaviour in war and which gives rise to strategic (in)certitude.[69] Indeed, from an existentialist-phenomenological perspective, it is the *desire for certitude* which is the condition for the possibility of incertitude; the *desire for certitude* is therefore the exogenous variable in Barkawi and Brighton's analysis.

In a strict sense, therefore, Barkawi and Brighton place the emphasis the wrong way round when they say that 'existential investments … remain vulnerable to the contingencies of war' (a statement which is only derivatively true).[70] 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 (and that agency is essentially conditioned). At a more fundamental level, however, it must be ontologically emphasised that war itself is *necessarily* (existentially) contingent on the agential-existential investments that humans make in war; that if there were no such existential investments, there could be no war. 'War/Truth', therefore, is not a force unto itself but the ontogenetic *manifestation* of agential human investments – however *strategically* hopeless those investments may be. To be sure, it is not a necessary condition of agency that it achieves its ends. If, for example, one chooses to become a soldier because they want a 'glorious' war, the fact that they become disillusioned with war does not undermine their act of agency to become a soldier in the first place; rather, it exposes a short-sightedness (or an ontological evolution in their being) and the unpredictable contingency of events. Moreover, their subsequent attempt to re-narrate their story and

[66] Barkawi and Brighton, 'Powers of war'. I am only concerned with the implications of their argument in this aforementioned (and highly influential) paper and am not implying anything about their other works – which both contain bodies (e.g. Tarak Barkawi, *Soldiers of Empire* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017]) and offer nuance on the question of agency (e.g. Brighton, 'Three propositions on the phenomenology of war').

[67] Barkawi and Brighton, 'Powers of war', p. 136; Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* [1961], trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquense University Press, 1969), p. 21.

[68] Barkawi and Brighton, 'Powers of war', p. 139.

[69] Cf. the existentialist literature on anxiety in IR: Felix Berenskötter, 'Anxiety, time, and agency', *International Theory*, 12:2 (2020), pp. 273–90; Rumelili, '[Our] age of anxiety'; C. Nicolai L. Gellwitzki, 'Stimmung and ontological security: Anxiety, euphoria, and emerging political subjectivities during the 2015 "border opening" in Germany', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 25:4 (2022), pp. 1101–25.

[70] Barkawi and Brighton, 'Powers of war', p. 140.

endow it retrospectively with meaning does not undermine the original act of agency either but is a new act of agency in itself. Below, I will begin to theorise how all existential investments in war are necessarily acts of (conditioned) agency, and how such acts must not only be incorporated into, but central to, the ontology of war.

As with Narozhna above, Barkawi and Brighton's disavowal of agency results – by logical implication – in a disavowal of war. If 'war' (and 'War/Truth') is not theoretically grounded in (agential) human *doing*, then it necessarily becomes hypostatised as an exogenous structural force/logic.[71] To avoid this theoretical implication, it is therefore necessary to recover Barkawi and Brighton's notion of ontogenesis and reconcile it with a theoretically elaborated agential human body. Indeed, as I show below, 'ontogenesis' makes no sense decontextualised from agential human being – that being which is the condition for its possibility. More specifically, the relationship between the epistemic power of war and the human body needs to be scrutinised and the order of logical dependency correctly established. Substantively, this entails theoretically and empirically elaborating how War/Truth is embraced, enacted, asserted, contested, and taken for granted by embodied humans, as the *agents of war*.

This disavowal of war – exemplified in the works of Narozhna and Barkawi and Brighton – finds its theoretical essence in Nordin and Öberg's notion of 'disappearance'. Through the example of modern military targeting, they explore how, in contemporary warfare, 'subjectivity, social relations and will are essentially liquidated by operational practices'; antagonistic subjects, as such, 'disappear in the "battle-rhythm" … replaced by the momentum of the targeting process itself'.[72] Moreover, and following the logic illustrated above, the hypostatisation of war likewise finds its essence in Nordin and Öberg's reasoning – when they suggest, for example, that 'the "agent" … is the medium itself'.[73] In stark contrast, I argue below that in order to be effectively interpreted and critiqued, war must be avowed in academic discourse (which is to say, theoretically re-cognised as *our* doing, as being in virtue of *our embodying* it). Moreover, agency – however technologically, socially, and historically mediated it is and will become – must be theoretically foregrounded. In his own critical Foucauldian ontology of war (which anticipated much of the debate about ontology above), Anthony Burke recognised this when, in his concluding remarks, he departs from Foucault and looks to agency as a way out of his pessimism.[74] From the perspective developed below, however, agency is not merely – or even necessarily – a way out of pessimism (indeed, our 'agency' constitutes the problem). I argue, rather, that agency *in* and *for* war is simply an inalienable fact of our kind of existence; it is the ontological ground of war which constitutively mediates discourse – whether that discourse be pacific or bellicose.

## Groundwork for a phenomenological ontology of war

> *all ontology, no matter how rich and firmly compacted a system of categories it has at its disposal, remains blind and perverted from its ownmost aim, if it has not first adequately clarified the meaning of Being, and conceived this clarification as its fundamental task*
>
> Martin Heidegger, 1927[75]

[71] On this point, I therefore agree with Jens Bartelson (*War in International Thought*, p. 24) when he warns 'that we should refrain from attributing ontogenetic capacities to anything but ourselves'.

[72] Nordin and Öberg, 'Targeting the ontology of war', pp. 399, 404, 405.

[73] Nordin and Öberg, 'Targeting the ontology of war', p. 403. This statement logically follows from a 'vital materialist' perspective (critically discussed below). It should also be noted that this ontology of war (as 'disappearance') cannot escape the charge of reification either (see notes 29 and 30 above); a negative statement is still, in its negativity, manifestly *positive* in terms of discursive effect.

[74] Burke, 'Ontologies of war'.

[75] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 31 [11], original emphasis.

I began this paper by suggesting that the *What is war* question – which is conventionally presupposed to be the essence of the ontology of war – presupposes too much (I then explored how certain of these presuppositions have resulted in the theoretical disavowal of war).[76] In large part, this is because the *What* question tends towards descriptive analysis; it thereby forgoes – to a significant and detrimental extent – an explanation and interpretation of the *Being of war*. To remedy this, I proposed in the Introduction an alternative set of ontological questions – of *Whence, How*, and *Why is war* – which go beyond (or beneath) description to problematise and clarify the *Being of war* as such. I am arguing that only on the basis of such a problematisation can we effectively answer the *What* question; such a clarification, moreover, is a pre-requisite for correctly formulating the interpretation and critique of war.

Since the *Being of war* itself has been presupposed within the ontology of war, let us begin this clarification with three foundational ontological propositions upon which the ensuing phenomenological-ontological analysis will build: first, the brute and incontestable fact *that war is* (that it *Ek-sists*, or *stands-out*, in its *Being*); second, that in its *Being*, the *Being of war* exists as a dialectic between possibility and actuality (that the possibility of war latently structures concrete actualities, whether bellicose or pacific, while the concrete actuality of war in history structures war in terms of its *Being* as a concrete possibility); and third, that this dialectic entails specific states and processes, i.e. of *Being/coming-into possibility* and of *Being/coming-into concrete actuality*. With these propositions in mind, I begin this problematisation of the ontogenesis of war by theorising the *condition for the possibility of the Being of war* as such; I then theorise the *Body of war*, and finally the *Agent of war*. Ultimately, I propose that the *Being, Body*, and *Agent of war* – as an *analytic* trinity – are an existential unity, unified in and contingent on the unity of human *Being*. Such, I contend, constitutes a theoretical basis for the avowal of war in academic discourse.

### *The* Being of war

In this subsection, I theorise the *condition for the possibility of the Being of war* through Heidegger's phenomenological ontology, and particularly through his notion of '*Dasein*'. *Dasein* is Heidegger's generalised term for human being in that it is meant to capture that which is distinctive – existentially and phenomenologically – 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.[77] Because it has the innate capacity to understand itself as existing, Dasein therefore exists in a 'constitutive state'.[78] Thus, 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-ontological'.[79] Dasein, as such, is *the* condition for the possibility of ontology in general; without Dasein there would be only a meaningless universe (at least in the unique way that human beings experience meaning, i.e. ontologically). Indeed, formal (academic) 'ontology' is simply the derivative formalisation of our essential and inalienable way of human Being. It is for this reason that Heidegger insists that any study of ontology must first understand Dasein ontologically; it is why 'We are ourselves the entities to be analysed'.[80] It is in this sense, moreover, that we can understand Heidegger's assertion (cited in the epigraph to this paper) that 'only as phenomenology is ontology possible' – since ontology is first and foremost a phenomenon which we live and experientially conceive, both naively (in everyday life) and theoretically.

Even though its essential nature is to be a Being that makes an issue of its own Being, however, Dasein does not spend much (if any) of its time merely concerned with its own existence.

[76] For a discussion of ontologically 'presupposing', see Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 27 [8].
[77] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 32 [12].
[78] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 32 [12].
[79] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 32 [12].
[80] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 67 [39].

On the contrary, it is Dasein's overwhelming proclivity to be directed away from itself as such, and towards its world. Moreover, it is only *from the world* that Dasein can recognise that it itself exists as a 'pre-ontological' entity – as a Being that makes an issue of its own Being.[81] Thus, 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.[82] Dasein's structure, therefore, is *Being-in-the-world*; 'world' thereby becomes the *World* – an existential milieu in and through which Dasein understands itself, and without which Dasein could not conceive of itself. Thus, World in general can be understood as one of Dasein's inalienable necessities; while any particular World is – in virtue of its concrete Being – one of Dasein's possibilities upon which it has constitutively projected itself.[83]

From here, a preliminary ontological statement about war can be made: however we conceive it methodologically, war *is* – as a possibility/actuality dialectic – in so far as it is one of Dasein's possibilities; war, as *War* (in this existentialist sense), is one of many possible Worlds through which Dasein may constitutively project itself. Thus, War *is* in virtue of its being projected forth – individually, collectively, and intersubjectively – as a social structure of human affairs. Contra recent ontologies of war discussed above, therefore, war is not an exogenous ontic force independent of *our* existential commitments. Rather, War is something humans do; its continuity in history is constituted only in the continuity of human doing. In short – and notwithstanding the myriad ways in which we are enticed, duped, or coerced into organising, perpetrating, supporting, or merely witnessing it; notwithstanding, moreover, its 'structure' – War is fundamentally *our* doing.

In some sense, this ontological statement reads like a truism; yet, as will be explored below, formulating an ontology of war from this first philosophy of phenomenological ontology opens new research avenues, especially into agency and moral responsibility. Moreover, this Heideggerian ontology of war allows us to categorically reject the disavowal of war in academic discourse – to morally 'reappropriate' war. Taken by itself, however, Heidegger's phenomenological ontology is radically incomplete. To be sure, *Being-ontological* is not merely an idealistic activity but something we do *in-the-world* (as Heidegger theorises); however, the particular manner in which we *are* in the world, namely, as embodied beings, is merely a sidenote for Heidegger.[84] Yet, if 'existence accomplishes itself in the body', as Merleau-Ponty argues,[85] then the body must be at the heart of any theory of *Being-ontological*, and therefore at the heart of the ontology of war. It is therefore to the *Being-ontological* of the human body that we turn to advance this phenomenological ontology of war.

### *The* Body of war

Nowhere is the embodied nature of *Being-ontological* more abruptly manifest than in war – an ontic reality shamefully and tragically outstanding in the degree to which it mobilises and obliterates bodies. As many of the aforementioned CWS scholars have observed, this basic fact has been chronically omitted from academic (and popular) discourses on war. Although it has its own logics, this omission reflects a broader tendency in Western thought which either entirely disregards the body or regards it as a problem to be overcome and transcended (a position essentialised in the philosophy of Descartes). In this subsection, I draw on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of

[81] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 37–8 [16].

[82] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 37–8 [16], 42 [20], 43 [21], 85 [58]. This is what makes Heidegger's phenomenology hermeneutical 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 (on this, see Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 62 [38]).

[83] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 188 [148].

[84] In his *Being and Time*, Heidegger mentions the body only in passing; he writes, for example, that Dasein's '"bodily nature" hides a whole problematic of its own, though we shall not treat it here' (Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 143 [108]).

[85] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 169.

the body to ground the ontology of war in embodiment; I theorise how war is 'accomplished' in and through its embodiment. I thereby make the body explicit in the ontology of war, but not merely as an 'object' upon which war is inflicted – whether through injury, dismemberment, or annihilation. First and foremost, the human body must be conceived as the *Body-of-war* – as that which existentially 'accomplishes' war as a possibility/actuality dialectic. As we see, this theoretically and methodologically points to the processes through which war is 'taken up'[86] – embodied, experienced, and enacted – as a way of Being-in-the-world.

To understand Merleau-Ponty's ontology of the body (and therefore his relevance to the ontology of war), it will be useful to broadly contrast his phenomenological method to that of Heidegger. While Heidegger's foundational concept was *being*, Merleau-Ponty shifted the focus to *perception* (and therefore to the *body which perceives*). Methodologically, this begins with stressing the fact that existence is only known to us through the 'act' of bodily perception.[87] Existence, however, is not conceived as ontologically exogenous, merely *revealed* to us through perception. Rather, in line with Heideggerian-phenomenological reasoning (and in opposition to Cartesian reasoning), Merleau-Ponty theorises existence as dialectically constituted *in* and *through* perception; hence, there is an essential (ontological) unity between these two – albethey separately conceivable – terms. This argument hinges on returning to the 'evidence of the senses' and rediscovering our 'naïve contact with the world'.[88] 'Naive consciousness', Merleau-Ponty writes, 'does not see in the soul the *cause* of the movements of the body nor does it put the soul in the body as the pilot of his ship. This way of thinking belongs to philosophy; it is not implied in immediate experience.'[89]

Throughout his works, the central example Merleau-Ponty uses to illustrate this point is sight, particularly his theory of the 'eye'. The 'eye' is not a window through which consciousness sees (a Cartesian position which merely pushes the mystery of sight further away and does nothing to solve it).[90] The 'eye', rather, is that which *sees*; it actively 'gazes' at the world, 'gears into it', and, in doing so, 'anticipates' it.[91] The relationship between my 'eye' and the 'object', as such, is not a geometrical projection from object to eye but is rather characterised by an essential 'promiscuity'.[92] My 'eye' constitutively 'holds' the object; the object, therefore, can be understood as the 'correlate of my body and, more generally, of my existence'.[93] In Heideggerian language, we might say that the 'eye' – as the metaphor for perception in general – *is ontologically* (i.e. that it sees that which it itself constitutes); moreover, we can understand *Being-ontological* as contingent on and emerging from *perceiving ontologically*. To be sure, this is not to resort to a form of idealism where the external world does not exist beyond what is *seen* – for there is necessarily a dialectical relationship between matter and sense (as Merleau-Ponty establishes, sense penetrates matter deeply).[94] Neither is it to resort to relativism or individualism – for, as phenomenologists stress, sense is invariably and

[86] See note 9 above.

[87] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior* [1942], trans. Alden L. Fisher (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), p. 224. Later, Merleau-Ponty articulates that 'the experience of perception is our presence at the moment when things, truths, values are constituted for us' (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'The primacy of perception and its philosophical consequences' [1946], trans. James M. Edie, in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception: And Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History, and Politics*, ed. James M. Edie (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), pp. 12–42 (p. 25).

[88] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. lxx.

[89] Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, p. 188.

[90] Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, p. 191.

[91] On the notion of 'gazing', see Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 232; on 'gearing into', p. 367; and on 'anticipation', p. 427.

[92] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 291; see also Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Eye and mind' [1961], trans. Carleton Dallery, in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James M. Edie, pp. 159–90 (p. 171).

[93] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 334.

[94] 'The miracle of the real world', Merleau-Ponty writes, 'is that in it sense and existence are one, and that we see sense take its place in existence once and for all' (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 338).

necessarily intersubjectively constituted.[95] It is, rather, to emphasise that 'existence accomplishes itself in the body', that 'the body is existence congealed or generalized', that 'existence is a perpetual embodiment'.[96] From here, we can understand the necessary contingency of ontology on perceptive corporeality.

We can now begin to state, with methodological clarity, the first (ontological) argument of this paper – about *Whence, How*, and *What* (existentially) war *is*: war – as a possibility/actuality dialectic – *is* in virtue of, and *as*, embodiment. At this point, we must clarify the distinction between actuality and possibility: pertinently, we must observe that the 'disembodiment of war' (in terms of the 'accomplishment of peace') is only the negation of war's concretely manifest existence, and not the negation of its (concrete) possibility – a possibility which, as social beings, is inalienably ours. Thus, it follows that the notion of a 'perpetual peace' in this Worldly existence – fundamentally characterised by ever-impending and open-ended possibilities – could at best mean a peace indefinitely prolonged within a continuous present, but never a 'peace' conclusively instated.[97] As I show in the following subsection, however, the manner in which this ontological argument (about the *embodied being of the possibility/actuality of war*) is established is consequential for understanding *Whence, How*, and *Why war is* – particularly in terms of agency and responsibility. First, and as a way of distinguishing these propositions from other perspectives in the recent literature which emphasise non-human embodiments of war, a distinction needs to be made between war's embodiment in inanimate objects and its embodiment by human subjects; following this, an order of existential contingency and dependence needs to be clarified between these two forms of embodiment so that the *human* genesis of war can be properly grasped.

In terms of inanimate, non-human embodiments of war, we can start by observing that the material and informational world is *there* (i.e., it *is*), before us; and except for the infinitesimally minuscule contributions each of us creatively offers to this world, it is (*apparently*) existentially independent of our own existence – of our own *Being-ontological*. Such is true of the *Sense-of-war*, which permeates the material-informational structure of human civilisation. Most explicitly, the *Sense of war* is manifest in monuments (statues of warriors, battlefield sites, etc.), in war media and art (novels, films, documentaries, paintings, etc.), in military arsenals and equipment, in political and cultural constitutions (broadly conceived), and in technological states, etc. As critical war scholars have shown, however, the *Sense of war* transcends these explicit embodiments, implicitly and latently infusing the infra-structure of the 'peaceful' and everyday world (the military historian barely exaggerates, therefore, when they say that human history is best understood through military history). As relatively transient, fleshy, conscious objects, we humbly encounter this world as it already *is* – a world already congealed into the ontological (infra-)structures of war. We indulge in war stories, fictional and real, we wield the metaphors of war in our language, and we carry the objects of war with our bodies. In short, we inescapably navigate the material-informational legacies of war.

It would be a mistake, however, to infer that these inanimate 'embodiments' possess existential autonomy; likewise, it would be erroneous to construe these war objects as possessing their own agency – as some, influenced by vital materialism, have done.[98] Such a position fundamentally

[95] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 354. On the *necessity* of the intersubjective constitution of sense, especially in the context of time/history, see Gadamer, *Truth and Method*.

[96] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 169.

[97] I believe it follows from my argument that 'peace', like war, is a *positive* temporal-ontological predicament which Dasein projects forth. Granting this, even the extinction of Dasein would not result in a 'perpetual peace'; such an extinction, rather, would result in the negation of the possibility of ontology itself (anthropocentrically, i.e. *ontologically*, speaking, of course).

[98] Above, for example, we saw how Holmqvist ('Undoing war', p. 545) proposes this vital materialist notion of agency. At the extreme, this results in the anthropomorphic characterisation of 'war' itself as an agent, not dissimilar to the pantheistic Greek notion of an *agential* god of war (see note 74 above). For a phenomenological argument against the vital materialist position in the context of war, see Mark Gilks, 'Narrating being through phenomena: The phenomenological and sociological insights of Harry Parker's *Anatomy of a Soldier*', *Social Epistemology*, 35:5 (2021), pp. 490–501.

misunderstands the nature of the object and of ontology in general; from our lack of will to individually/collectively determine the sense of the object, it infers the object's existential independence/autonomy (a more parsimonious solution is that our contemporary power is limited by the sediments of our individual and collective former endowments – that sense 'sticks', so to speak). Indeed, from an existentialist-phenomenological perspective, we see that the sense-bearing object – notwithstanding its transcendence of my own, individual, existence – does not transcend human existence in general. In existentialist terms, the sense-bearing object does not transcend Dasein's *perceiving ontologically* (which, as we have seen, is the condition for the possibility of ontology in general). Although it is true – phenomenologically speaking – that sense 'penetrates matter', this penetration must be understood as *phenomenal* and not 'objective' since the object's 'sense' exists only in and through the human field of embodied experience. In other words, sense only exists – by definition – in virtue of our (actively) sensing it, subjectively and intersubjectively. Thus, although it is necessary to acknowledge that we are inalienably entangled in intersubjective and historically constituted webs of significance, and that we should therefore be humble before the apparently pre-existing world, we should not swing to the opposite extreme by idolising and hypostatising the sense-bearing object or (more generally) the ontological structure – both of which owe their existence to Dasein. In short, existentialist phenomenology teaches us that all inanimate embodiments are, in essence, human embodiments. Thus, we necessarily mediate the *Sense of war*, and as such we mediate its apparently 'objective' embodiments. But what is the moral significance of our part in this mediation? To this we finally turn.

## *The* Agent of war

Hitherto, I have made the following ontological argument: since war is an ontic reality, and since all ontic realities necessarily owe their existence to the condition for the possibility of ontology in general, namely, the embodied human state of *perceiving ontologically*, we can conclude that war *is* – as a possibility/actuality dialectic – in so far as *we embody it*; moreover, this implies that the manner in which we embody it determines the way in which it *is*. In brief, we have established that *war is qua embodiment*. This existentialist-phenomenological ontology of war has many potential methodological ramifications; in the rest of the paper, I focus on what I believe is the most significant, namely the normative implication regarding agency – especially because it opens the possibility of responsibility and hence new avenues for critique and intervention.

Let me begin on this theme by outlining an alternative – I contend erroneous – proposition: even though ontic phenomena necessarily flow through human being (that fundamental being to which ontic realities owe their existence), we do not 'have a hand in' that which comes to *be*, ontically, in virtue of our own being. That is, one might grant the existential primacy of embodied human *being* and still reason that our *being* is such that it is not active – that we are mere 'witnesses' to that which our particular mode of being constitutes. On this account, for example, Barkawi and Brighton might accept one aspect of my phenomenological-existentialist argument, granting that 'War/Truth' – in virtue of its existence – necessarily flows through human being; yet they might still maintain that the individual human being is docile and powerless in response to the overarching 'structural' logics of this epistemic force. At the level of the atomised and momentary individual, situated in the world as they find it, this might seem convincing – since my power to choose the tradition of war which is 'handed down' to me is fundamentally limited, as is my ability to meaningfully choose how I act in each given moment in response to that tradition. However, such a position is problematic for at least two reasons: either because it implies a dualism at the heart of *being*, or because it negates altogether that which is distinctive about human being (that we are conscious entities, more on which below). The implied dualism would be untenable because it positions the human being as a docile node through which ontic realities (War/Truths) flow; while consciousness may exist, it comes to exist in the form of a mere 'observer' to some essentially exogenous (and, I suppose, deterministic) *being ontological*. Thus, there is a conscious yet docile pilot in the ship that is the historically situated embodied being, fated by War/Truth. In response to this position, it should

first be noted that any such implied dualism carries its own burden of proof: how is it possible that we carry forth War/Truth, yet have no hand in it? The basic problem with Barkawi and Brighton's method – which, in this sense, is somewhat representative of post-structuralist approaches to ontology and corporeality in CWS more generally – is that human beings tend to be spoken of as mere bodies.[99] Yet, human beings are not simply bodies – if by 'bodies' we mean material entities 'cast into motion' by exogenous forces. Rather, and as Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty have shown us, bodies are *embodied pre-ontological beings* – i.e. not merely *beings* for whom their own *embodied being* is an issue, and for whom the *being* of the ontic realities in which they exist is also an issue, but also *Beings* which *bring forth* and *constitute* those issues in the first place. On this view, to be clear, there is no dualism: we *are* that which we carry forth, we *are* 'War/Truth'. Thus, 'War/Truth' *is* in so far as *we are it*. But what does it mean, from a phenomenological-existentialist perspective, 'to have a hand in' ontic reality; what, in other words, is the nature of our agency?

In response to this question, it is first necessary to dispel a strawman of freedom contested by rationalist (and many critical) philosophies. 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'.[100] Influenced by natural science (particularly, and nostalgically, Newtonian physics), rationalist theorists invariably choose the latter and understand the 'cause' as originating outside of the body and thereby understand the body and its behaviour as determined by exogenous forces. For critical theorists (who, in the relevant literature, are predominantly post-structuralist), the result is the same; although the rationalist binaries may be challenged, thereby principally incorporating an 'agent' into the structure, the overwhelming emphasis is still placed on exogenous force (in this case, at the level of socio-political symbolic 'force', rather than physical/biochemical force). From a phenomenological-existentialist perspective, however, the rationalist notion of freedom is chimerical. As Merleau-Ponty argues, the genuine choice is not the momentary and abstract decisions of the will – for we could not *be* anything enduring and consistent if we were so radically free (and thus, we could not *be* anything at all, for *being* implies temporal-spatial continuity and demarcation). Rather, 'the genuine choice is the choice of our whole character and of our way of being in the world'.[101] Take, for example, an extreme case: it may be true that the volunteer combat soldier – overwhelmed by the relatively totalitarian social forces of a military institution – could not choose to disobey an order to charge the enemy; nor, perhaps, might they be able to choose, in a given moment, to negate their complicity with such orders (such would entail self-negation). Notwithstanding this temporally local existential impotence, however, this person did choose, over a period of becoming who they are, the *life* of a soldier – to *be*/*become* someone who would be complicit with military orders. Here, crucially, 'life' is not an aggregate of impotent 'moments'; rather, 'moments' are inferred (conceptually demarcated) from the prior totality of a *life* which is lived a certain way, in accordance with a certain will. This *hermeneutic* notion of freedom is of course context dependent and conditioned (as Merleau-Ponty observes, 'freedom only modifies history by taking up what history *offered*'[102]); yet, we must bear in mind that 'history' (including 'structure' and 'symbolic force') does not speak for itself. 'History', indeed, would not *be* without the *historicising gaze* of the historically situated observer.[103]

This phenomenological critique of the agent of war has several potential implications for CWS. Theoretically, it allows us to move beyond a mutually exclusive agency/structure dichotomy

[99]I am not claiming that agency is not compatible with post-structuralism, only that it *tends* to be disavowed or undertheorised within a framework which prioritises an ontology of symbolic power (as we saw in the first section above). Here, I agree with (and will not repeat) Narozhna's critique (see note 12 above); though, of course, I disagree with her subsequent application of the phenomenological method.

[100]Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 467.

[101]Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 463.

[102]Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 476.

[103]On this point, see Gadamer (*Truth and Method*), who advances and clarifies Heidegger's hermeneutical phenomenology. For an argument along these lines in the context under discussion, see Mark Gilks, 'Battlefield monuments and popular historicism: A hermeneutic study of the aesthetic encounter with "Waterloo"', *Critical Military Studies*, 8:4 (2021), pp. 1–21.

and instead focus on how agency is historically structured and on how particular structures are manifest – 'taken up'/embodied – by agential human beings. Thus, instead of asking *What are the exogenous logics of War/Truth*, we can ask *What is the existential appeal, to situated being, of this particular and historically contingent War/Truth?* Ontology (and *Being-ontological*), as such, becomes the arch-methodological notion within which structure and agency are two sides of the same ontological coin (rather than being presented, implicitly or explicitly, as mutually exclusive). Empirically, this notion of freedom allows us to shift the focus from structures per se to exploring how structures are embodied. We might, for example, ask questions about how the aesthetic forms of war influence young soldiers or citizens; but rather than conceiving the aesthetic form as an exogenous force, mysteriously and autonomously 'flowing' through aesthetic mediums, it can be understood as something that exists in so far as it is valorised and embraced as a meaningful – and, indeed, often 'beautiful' – way of being.[104] It is true that we cannot choose the aesthetic repertoire of war that is 'handed down' to us; we do, however, choose from that repertoire which forms to 'take up' and valorise in the enactment of ourselves, whether we are perpetrating war or merely reading a war novel. Moreover, this *choosing from the repertoire* is invariably an interpretative and creative synthesis of the 'handed down'- however powerless we feel in relation to the 'author's' convincingness. Likewise, we might ask how narratives of war (as 'War/Truths') are conveyed through media such as war monuments; but instead of focusing on the 'objective' narrative presented to the historical observer, we can ask how the observer, in their *Being-ontological, monumentalises* the object, thereby constituting its monumentality as such.[105] The war object and its repertoires of meaning are 'given to us', yet *we* – as embodied agents who make existential investments in the world – are the pivots of its continuity.

## Conclusion

This paper was initially motivated by a normative concern that the disembodiment of war in theory will impede the disembodiment of war in practice. If war is disavowed – conceived as an exogenous force afflicting humanity like a plague, or denigrated as inherently and exclusively destructive of meaning – then the processes through which the phenomenon of war – as an ontic reality, meaningful in virtue of its very *Being* – is actively embodied will be methodologically obscured. From a phenomenological-ontological perspective, I have therefore tried to theoretically illuminate a basic truism: that war *is* in so far as *we embody* it; moreover, that *we* are the agent(s) of that embodiment, and therefore the agent(s) of war. What we mean by 'agent', of course, determines whether this is indeed a truism. I conceived an 'agent' which, through its embodied and hermeneutically situated *perceiving ontologically*, constitutes both the possibility and manifest actuality of war. As I set out in the Introduction and first section above, I see these insights not as mutually exclusive but as contributing – hopefully through a creative tension – to existing critiques of war in CWS. I have, however, only proposed a groundwork (a brief sketch of what I believe phenomenology offers); in closing, I point to three avenues for ongoing phenomenological research on war.

First, in order to focus on the alternative ontological questions of the *Whence, How*, and *Why* of war, I put aside the ontological question of *What war is*. I believe, however, that phenomenology offers a unique perspective on this question. In my recently completed doctoral thesis, for example, I invert Heidegger's notion of *Being-with* to theorise the basic ontological structure of enmity in war as *Being-against*; I propose this as an alternative to the Clausewitzian *war-as-fighting* ontology.[106] Heidegger's phenomenology (and the phenomenological method more broadly), however, is much richer than my application; further phenomenological research in CWS might draw

[104]Gilks, 'The aesthetic influences of war'.

[105]Gilks, 'Battlefield monuments and popular historicism'.

[106]Mark Gilks, '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', PhD diss., Brussels School of International Studies, University of Kent (2023).

on these resources to further critique, for example, the relationship between war and time/history (through dialectical and hermeneutical reasoning) or the stubborn methodological binaries which prevail in traditional methodologies (such as that between technology and human bodies).

Second, existentialist phenomenology could productively instruct our moral and political imagination regarding war and peace. To this end, I offered a foundational normative injunction – principally, because the re-avowal of agency *in* war is, by the same token, a re-avowal of responsibility *for* war; pragmatically, because an understanding of the embodiment of war potentially facilitates an understanding of what is necessary for its disembodiment (in terms of accomplishing peace). This reckoning, however, points to the need to clarify not only the *What* of war, but also the *What* of peace – as that which is embodied in the wake of war. From a phenomenological perspective, I would preliminarily suggest that 'peace' (like 'war') be conceived positively as something we agentially and constitutively *do* (rather than negatively as the mere absence of war). Moreover, I suggest that war and peace be conceived as two mutually exclusive possibilities of social existence – that where and the extent to which one *is* the other *is not*. Thus, war is disembodied in so far as peace is embodied. Of course, neither war or peace could ever be disembodied as existential possibilities (herein lies both the tragedy and hope of existence); optimistically, however, both the *What* of these possibilities and conditions of their (dis)embodiment could be better understood through the phenomenological method.

Finally, I believe phenomenological ontology is well positioned to reflect on our critical historical juncture, characterised most concerningly by an ontological uncertainty – both methodological and existential – about the future of war. The relevance of existentialism to debates about nuclear annihilation has already been considered;[107] the concepts developed above may contribute in this regard. Moreover, I believe phenomenological ontology could insightfully problematise rapidly evolving technologies in the context of war. Vis-à-vis 'autonomous' weapons, for example, phenomenological ontology, as we have seen, places the bar for 'autonomy' very high (in terms of *Being-ontological*). Hypothetically, if weapons accomplished such an autonomy, the medium would indeed become the agent, and there would be 'autonomous war' (at least in so far as *we* were concerned; but not, I suppose, in so far as *they* were concerned). Between our current predicament and this hypothetical extreme, however, much else – perhaps everything else – is at stake and uncertain. Existentialist phenomenology promises at least to provoke a moral reckoning as we stumble inexorably into ontological upheaval; more optimistically, it may grant us the foresight needed to steer away from the precipice of war's Dasein-nihilating potential.

**Video abstract.** To view the online video abstract, please visit: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210525000099.

**Acknowledgements.** This article has benefited significantly from the thorough engagement of the *RIS* editors and three anonymous reviewers. For this I am honoured and grateful. I am also grateful to the European International Studies Association (EISA) for supporting this research through a Postdoctoral Bridge Grant. All shortcomings are my responsibility.

**Competing interests.** I have no conflicting interests to declare.

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[107] E.g. Antoine Bousquet, 'Nuclear existentialism: On the philosophical response to life and death under the bomb', *Review of International Studies* (2024), pp. 1–19, available at: {https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210524000512}.

Cite this article: Mark Gilks, 'Towards a phenomenological ontology of war', *Review of International Studies*, 51 (2025), pp. 707–725. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210525000099