

## **WAR: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

War has been a constant of human history. Anthropologists have shown that wars were fought even in the early days of *homo sapiens*.<sup>1</sup> And even as we are writing these lines, at least one major war is going on, another has just ended, and, ominously, rumblings of a third are heard in the horizon. Thematizations and reflections on war have also existed from very early period of human civilization. Art and literature of all times are replete with works on the theme of war: some glorifying it and others lamenting over it. There have also been scientific studies of war: some by military historians, others by social scientists and psychologists; some from the perspective of sharpening future warfare by learning from the wars executed by great generals such as Alexander, Julius Caesar, Napoleon, Wallenstein etc., others from the perspective of searching for ways of avoiding future wars.

The present article seeks to make war a theme of study, but it aims at a *phenomenological* study of war. The first task of such an enterprise is that of clarifying the import of the phrase ‘phenomenology of war’, for it is not immediately clear what is to be understood under it- what precisely its field of investigation is and what the method to be followed is in investigating that field. None of the pioneers of phenomenological movement has done a phenomenological investigation of the phenomenon of war. For Husserl phenomenology was primarily a means to clarify the phenomenon of knowledge, especially knowledge in the abstract sciences like logic and mathematics; even in his investigations into life-world, where roots of human conflict and war should have been spotted, he was guided by the goal of tracing the rootedness of scientific knowledge in a pre-scientific life. Neither does Heidegger’s analytic of

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Lawrence Keeley, *War Before Civilization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996)

Dasein in *Being and Time*, undertaken in view of a fundamental ontology, find a place for the analysis of conflict and violence as a possible mode of *Dasein*'s *Mit-sein* with other *Daseins*. Therefore, we shall first clarify what is meant by 'phenomenology of war'. In Sections 1, 2 and 3 we shall attempt to clearly demarcate its field of investigation and determine its method. Section 4 will give a general phenomenological characterization of war as coalitional, purposive intergroup violence. Section 5 will be devoted to the study of war as a cultural phenomenon that has received the meaning-bestowal as 'instrument' from subjectivity. section 5.1. will examine violence in general and 5.2 will examine the phenomenological performance of subjectivity which bestows on violence the meaning of 'instrument' or 'means', which leads to the possibility of using violence for achieving one's ends. Section 6 will examine the subjective performances that lead to the formation of in-groups and out-groups which opens up the possibility of coalitional use of violence by one group against another. Then in the Conclusion we shall draw together the results of the investigation.

## **1. PHENOMENOLOGY AS PURE DESCRIPTION OF THE EIDOS OF PHENOMENA**

Phenomenology may be described as a philosophical enterprise that aims at 'pure description of phenomena'. Each word of the phrase calls for some clarification. Firstly, the claim that it is a *description*. Such a claim entails the rejection of the normally accepted ideal of science and philosophy. Normally, sciences and philosophy aim at *explanation* of phenomena- one phenomenon is sought to be *explained* by pointing out the cause that brings it about. But phenomenology consciously desists from any attempt to *explain* phenomena causally; it seeks to describe them as they reveal themselves to the investigative gaze.<sup>2</sup> Thus,

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<sup>2</sup> In the first edition of his *Logical Investigations* Husserl had characterized his investigations as 'descriptive psychology'; it was from the time to the second edition of the work that Husserl terms his investigations 'phenomenology'. Descriptive psychology, as distinct from the then-prevalent

phenomenology of war does not seek to provide causal explanations of war, but seeks to describe the ‘phenomenon’ of war as it reveals itself to the phenomenological gaze.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, phenomenological description is claimed to be a ‘pure’ description. The ‘purity’ of the description wants to make the description free of any admixture with presuppositions or anything that the phenomenon itself does not reveal. Thirdly, the ‘what’ of phenomenological study is ‘phenomena’. But the ‘phenomenon’ that phenomenology seeks to describe is not the appearing events and objects understood ‘objectively’, that is, understood as standing in isolation from subjectivity to which they appear. Of course, this is how we normally – in our “natural attitude”- take what appears to us, namely, as devoid of any essential connection to subjectivity. But the central insight of phenomenology is that no objectivity can be given without it being correlated to subjectivity. Until and unless a phenomenological attitude is consciously put in the place of our usual “natural attitude” this essential relatedness of the all appearing objectivities to the subjectivity to which they appear remains hidden. The phenomenon that phenomenology seeks to describe is reality in this noetic-noematic co-relation; it is neither subjectivity by itself nor objectivity by itself but the two in their essential relatedness.<sup>4</sup> Phenomenon in this sense is not available to external observation, but is given only to a peculiar ‘phenomenological reflection’

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explanatory psychology and as a necessary foundation for the latter was introduced and practised by Franz Brentano, Husserl’s teacher at Vienna University.

<sup>3</sup> There are many recent valuable studies that investigate the causes of war. One such recent study is Richard Overy’s *Why War?* [Richard Overy, *Why War?* (London: Penguin Books, 2025)]. In the first part of the book Overy examines the causal explanations of war given by evolutionary biology, psychology anthropology and ecology; and in the second part he examines other motivational forces of war such as resources, belief, power and security. Another study providing causal explanation of war is: George Pitman, *Why War? An Enquiry into the Genetic and Social Sources of Human Warfare* (Indianapolis, IN: Dog Ear Publishing, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Husserl calls the performance that enables the transition from natural attitude to the phenomenological attitude epoché, “bracketing”, “suspension of the judgment of the natural attitude” etc. Cf. Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. F. Kersten (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982), §§30-32. (Hereafter referred to as *Ideas I*)

which catches the experience as it constitutes and brings to presentation the correlated phenomena.

Phenomenological description is an ‘eidetic description, that is, it does not seek to describe one particular experience, but the invariable structure or ‘*eidos*’ that all particular experiences of a class share with one another. The method that Husserl has developed for the intuition of the *eidos* of an experience is ‘imaginative variation’. The method consists in varying the different aspects of an object in imagination to find out what belongs to it essentially. For example by varying the color of a triangle in imagination one can come to the realization that color does not belong to the essence of a triangle; even if you give it any color, or does not give it any color at all, the triangle remains a triangle; similarly we can vary its shape in imagination and find out that triangularity is its essence or *eidos*.<sup>5</sup>

So, to attempt a phenomenology of war is to aim at a pure, eidetic description of the phenomenon of war in the peculiar sense of ‘phenomenon’ determined above. Phenomenon of war is revealed not to external observation. To external observation war is actual people fighting with one another in battle fields, it is the warplanes and battleships; it is the flying missiles and falling bombs; it is the yelling of the combatants and the cries of the wounded, sound of gunshots, explosion of bombs; it is the sight of the maimed and the wounded and the dead. The thematic field of phenomenology of war is not this external spectacle of the war; neither is it the subjectivity of the spectator of these external objects and events. Phenomenology of war aims to look at and describe the psychical event that brings all these about. There is no war without human subjectivity that brings it about. The phenomenology of war seeks to describe what is essentially involved in such a subjectivity as it constitutes the phenomenon of war.

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Edmund Husserl Ideas I §§69–70.

## 2. PHENOMENOLOGY OF WAR AS EIDETIC AND PURE DESCRIPTION OF THE PHENOMENON OF COLLECTIVE USE OF VIOLENCE

We should note here that several different things already exist under the head ‘phenomenology of war’. Firstly, there are studies that aim at the description of the subjectivity of the victims of war under this name.<sup>6</sup> In such studies phenomenological description of HOW victims of war experience war, has been given in terms of the destruction of their meaning-system, their life world, their sense of loss etc. Secondly, there are also studies on how war has affected the very phenomenological philosophy itself, bringing to it new themes and new methods to address them. It has been shown that the devastating experience of the First World War led Husserl to shift his focus from epistemological questions to more existential themes and to the questions at the ‘limits of phenomenology’ such as ethics, immortality and God.<sup>7</sup> But these are at best characterized as impact of war on phenomenological thinking, rather than a phenomenology of war itself. It should be noted that war itself is not the proper theme of investigation in such studies. War is organized violence of one group against another for attaining certain goals. Destruction of life and property, and of meaning systems that sustain society etc. is the result of such massive violence, and not the violence itself. Therefore, a phenomenology of war should look at and describe

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<sup>6</sup> For a phenomenology of war in this sense see, Yunus Emre Özigci, “On the Phenomenology of War and Peace: Studying the Ukrainian Event” *Perspectives - Journal of Political Science*, vol.28, (October 2023). Staudigl’s phenomenological study of violence too thematizes violence from the point of view of the victims of violence. Michael Staudigl, “Towards a Phenomenological Theory of Violence: Reflections following Merleau-Ponty and Schutz”, *Human Studies* Vol.30, No. 3 (Sep., 2007): 233-253

<sup>7</sup> Nicolas de Warren and Thomas Vongehr (ed.), *Philosophers at the Front: Phenomenology and the First World War* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2018). See also Hans Rainer Sepp, „Die Grenze der Solidarität: der erste Weltkrieg und die Phänomenologie“ *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie*, Nr. 4 (2014): 761-793.

the phenomenon of this organized group violence. It is this violence that constitutes war.

War, as we said, is collective violence. In none of the above-mentioned studies of war we find a description of the phenomenon of violence. We hold that a phenomenology of war is primarily a study of collective violence. But not the external manifestations of that violence like wounding, maiming killing, destroying etc. But the phenomenon of violence itself; and that phenomenon has its seat in subjectivity. And it is here that phenomenology comes in. Phenomenology of war will be an investigation into the subjective phenomenon of collective violence.

### **3. THE QUESTION OF PHENOMENOLOGICAL ACCESS TO THE PHENOMENON OF WAR**

The important question that faces the investigator at the threshold of such a phenomenology of war is ‘how does the phenomenologist get access to the phenomenon of war?’. Of course, since the phenomenologist himself has not necessarily engaged in war, the act-phenomenology that Husserl used to clarify knowledge in general and knowledge in mathematics and logic in particular is inappropriate to a phenomenology of war. The promise of an appropriate method we find in the method that later Husserl used to clarify the teleological sense of certain human historical enterprises, like science, philosophy and logic which, having originated in subjective constitutive performances of past men, continue to be practiced by subsequent generations, though often in forgetfulness of the original *telos* of such activity. Husserl’s method to address such issues is ‘*Besinnung*’, reflection.<sup>8</sup> Fundamental to such a method is the insight that life forms a historical continuum and therefore we live in a spiritual-

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<sup>8</sup> George Heffernan, “Universal *Besinnung* or *Selbstbesinnung*: Husserl’s Method for the Treatment of Ethical, Existential, and Metaphysical Questions as *Grenzprobleme* of Phenomenology”, <https://www.memphis.edu/philosophy/opo2019/pdfs/heffernangeorge.pdf#> (accessed on, January 30, 2026).

human world that extends to the life of past generation.<sup>9</sup> It is possible to enter that world by re-activating the sedimentations of the original intentionality that gave birth to such enterprises as science, philosophy and logic. It is true that organized group violence of war is not an intellectual activity like science and philosophy which is handed down to us in texts and therefore which we can enter, and reactivate the original intentionality that constituted them. Yet war is part of our human heritage, a heritage that has shaped us into what we are in a historical spiritual manner. Sedimentations of past wars are available to us in the form of texts, and archeological and historical reconstructions. Through their medium we can enter the subjective world of war and reactivate the intentionality holding sway there, and then make them a theme of reflection and pure eidetic description.

#### **4. PHENOMENOLOGICAL CHARACTERIZATION OF WAR AS COALITIONAL, GOAL-ORIENTED INTER-GROUP VIOLENCE**

One essential element of the phenomenon of war is that it is violence. But one individual's act of violence against another is not war; war is group violence or collective violence- one group's violence against another to achieve its goals and the counter-violence provoked by it.<sup>10</sup> Phenomenologically it pre-supposes two things: the perception of violence as an instrument for achieving one's goals, and the experiential encounter with other human beings under the meanings of 'friend' and 'foe' opening up the possibility of the formation of in-groups (coalition)

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<sup>9</sup> According to Husserl we "not only have a spiritual heritage but have become what we are thoroughly and exclusively in a historical-spiritual manner." (Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 71. Therefore, the past lives in us and historical reflections are truly "self-reflections". Ibid., 72

<sup>10</sup> Richard Overly defines warfare as "... collective, purposive, lethal inter-group violence, whether raids, or ambushes, or skirmishes, or ritual violence, or the more familiar pitched battles of the historical period". Richard Overly, *Why War?* (London: Pelican Books, 2025), 8.

and out-groups (enemy) on the basis of such encounter- in-group consisting of friends and the out-group consisting of foes.

Phenomenologically such purposive, coalitional violence has its proper locus in the essential structure of human existence which Heidegger has analyzed as ‘being-in-the-world’. This world that *Dasein* is in, is a world of beings that have the character of *Dasein* (other men) and beings that do not have that character (the environmental world of objects). To the environmental world *Dasein* relates in ‘circumspective dealings’ in which the objects appear as ‘ready-to-hand’, as useful things.<sup>11</sup> With beings that have the character of *Dasein* one relates in ‘solicitude’.<sup>12</sup> As Heidegger’s analysis shows, these two ways of being are constitutive of *Dasein*. *Dasein* is always and already dealing with things and relating to other human beings in solicitude. Extending Heidegger’s analysis further we maintain that humans also encounter the phenomenon of violence, allowing its instrumental character to stand out.

We also take a cue from an indication that Heidegger gives in his analysis of solicitude to argue that the possibility of viewing other *Dasein*’s as being friends or foe is rooted in the structure of *Mitsein* of *Dasein*. As Heidegger points out there are many possible ways for *Dasein* to be with other *Dasein*. And one such possible way is to be *against one another*. Heidegger writes about the possible ways of being with. Heidegger writes:

Being for, against, or without one another, passing one another by, not “mattering” to one another- these are possible ways of solicitude. And, it is precisely these last-named deficient and Indifferent modes that characterize every day, average Being-with-one-another.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 95-102.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 155-60.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

It is to be noted that Heidegger here mentions 'being against one another, as a possible way of being with other Dasein. He does not give a further phenomenological exploration of this possible way of being-with. We see here the phenomenological basis for the sociological observation that humans tend to form in-groups consisting of friends and out-groups consisting of foes.

This dual structure of human being-in-the-world analyzed by Heidegger forms the phenomenological foundations for constituting war as a purposive, coalitional inter-group violence.

## **5. WAR AS A CULTURAL PHENOMENON; THE MEANING-BEGETTING FUNCTION OF SUBJECTIVITY**

A spontaneous biology-driven outburst of violence does not constitute war. War is the phenomenon of one group using violence on another as a means for achieving its goals. It is a goal-oriented act of employing the means that are perceived to be effective in achieving those goals. Therefore, the usual chastisement of war saying that it is senseless violence does not hold much water. War is organized and planned use of violence. Now for this to happen violence has to be perceived by people in a particular way. In other words, it has to be bestowed with a meaning. We argue in the following that from a phenomenological standpoint war is not mere violence, but violence imbued with a cultural meaning, bestowed on it by subjectivity.

### **5.1. SOME ACCOUNTS OF WAR THAT VIEW IT AS A BIOLOGICAL PHENOMENON**

Now, there are certain accounts of war that claim that it is a phenomenon rooted in human nature. Basically, the argument runs: violence is rooted in biological nature; war is violence; therefore, war is rooted in biological nature. Against such accounts we argue that though *violence* is a biologically determined behavior, *war* is not. The phenomenon of war can be adequately described only when we see it as a cultural

phenomenon. We shall examine below three accounts of war that see it as a natural rather than a cultural phenomenon by Sigmund Freud, by evolutionary biology and by Rene Girard - and point out their insufficiency. Then we shall examine how war as a cultural phenomenon is constituted by subjectivity.

According to Freud violence is one of the two basic instincts of “every living creature”. For him “the inclination to aggression is an original, self-subsisting instinctual disposition in man”<sup>14</sup> and “this aggressive instinct is the derivative and the main representative of the death instinct ...”<sup>15</sup> Death instinct (*Thanatos*) and its opposite, love (*Eros*) are the two basic instincts of man. He writes: “human instincts are only of two kinds: those which seek to preserve and unite ... and those which seek to destroy and kill”<sup>16</sup>. The latter he called *Thanatos* or Death Instinct and the former *Eros*<sup>17</sup>. He further says that “the Death instinct turns into the destructive instinct when, with the help of special organs, it is directed outwards, on to objects.”<sup>18</sup>

It is to be noted that Freud offers this theory as an answer to the question ‘Why War?’ posed by Albert Einstein.<sup>19</sup> So, for Freud war can be explained in terms of certain biological, or natural instincts of humans. However, we shall argue that, though violence is a biologically determined phenomenon, war as coalitional, purposeful violence can arise only when humans interpret violence as a means for achieving one’s goals.

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<sup>14</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, in Penguin Freud Library vol.12: Civilization, Society and Religion (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 313.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 314.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 357.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 357.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 357.

<sup>19</sup> In 1931 Einstein was invited by the League of Nations’ International Institute of Intellectual Co-operation to select a correspondent on a subject of his choice. In response, Einstein invited Freud as his correspondent to answer the question ‘Is there a way of delivering mankind from the menace of war?’ Freud answered this question in a short pamphlet named “Why War?” where he elaborates an answer in terms of his theory of Death Instinct. Letter of Einstein and Freud’s pamphlet are published in *Ibid.* pp.345-362.

According to modern evolutionary biology, too, violence is rooted in the dynamics of biological evolution. Evolutionary biologists explain violence in terms of its function in the survival and thriving of the organism.<sup>20</sup> It is found in the animal kingdom as a whole. Such biology-based violent behavior is switched on by biological mechanisms, neuronal mechanisms in the brain, and automatically shut down the same way. We should note here that it does not, by itself, develop into large scale violence of one group upon another consciously planned, executed, controlled and concluded as war is. For such a thing to happen man should transit the plane of nature and enter the plane of culture where natural phenomena are imbued with human meanings.<sup>21</sup>

Though Freud has only suspected the deep essential link between desire and violence,<sup>22</sup> it is Rene Girard who affirms an essential link between desire and violence. According to him desire is mimetic, that is, I desire something because I want to imitate someone who possesses that thing. I find that possession of that thing gives him value and being; and I want to be like him in being and value, by possessing that which has given him value and being. But when two desires converge on one and the same thing conflict between those who desire it is inevitable.<sup>23</sup> Violence having

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. John Archer, "The Nature of Human Aggression," *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry* 32, (2009), 203-4.

<sup>21</sup> Nam C. Kim and Mark Kiessel argue that "human forms of organized violence are qualitatively different than those seen in other species, despite some similarities along certain dimensions"; and they see this distinguishing feature of organized human violence in culture. They write: "... the cultural dimensions of warfare of any human society, whether a nation-state of a billion people or a small band of twenty-five, arguably have more in common with each other than with aspects of organized violence within other species." Nam C. Kim and Marc Kiessel, *Emergent Warfare in our Evolutionary Past*, (New York: Routledge, 2018), 48-49.

<sup>22</sup> Freud expresses such suspicion when sees a link between sadism and Eros. Cf. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, in Penguin Freud Library, Vol.12: Civilization, Society and Religion (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 312-13

<sup>23</sup> Girard writes: "Once his basic needs are satisfied (indeed, sometimes even before), man is subject to intense desire, though he may not know precisely for what. The reason is that he desires being, something he himself lacks and which some other person seems to possess. The subject thus looks to that other person to inform him of what he should desire in order to acquire that being. If the model, who is apparently already endowed with superior being, desires some object, the object must surely be capable of conferring an even greater plenitude of being. It is not through words, therefore, but by the example of his own desire that the model conveys to the subject the supreme desirability of the object. ... Two desires converging on the same object are bound to clash. Thus, mimesis

been born in this way has a tendency to escalate and engulf the whole group, leading to its possible destruction. Girard states, “If left unappeased, violence will accumulate until it overflows its confines and floods to surrounding area.”<sup>24</sup> “The slightest outbreak of violence can bring about a catastrophic escalation”, because it is “eminently communicable” and “there is something infectious about the spectacle of violence” and “it is impossible to stay immune from the infection”.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, for Girard too, violence in its origin and spread is rooted in nature. Violence by nature is communicable, infectious and catastrophic for the entire community. According to him in primitive societies the institution of ritual sacrifice arises as a cultural institution to stem the tide of violence and thus to save communities from catastrophic violence. In ritual sacrifice violence hurls itself on a surrogate, the sacrificial victim. In other words, ritual sacrifice is a cultural invention of man to prevent violence, which has a natural tendency to escalate and spread, from destroying the community by diverting it to a harmless victim. Once the sacrifice is made, there is a sense of release among the members of the community; possibility of violence removed, the community again joins in united celebration. “The role of sacrifice is to stem the rising tide of indiscriminate violence and re-direct violence into proper channels.”<sup>26</sup> Or “The function of sacrifice is to quell violence within the community and to prevent conflicts from erupting.”<sup>27</sup>

Thus, for Girard too, like for Freud, large scale violence like war can be explained on a natural plane. For Girard, culture steps in, in the form of ritual sacrifice only to prevent the possibility of such large-scale violence.

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coupled with desire leads automatically to conflict. Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 164-65.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 15.

## 5.2. SUBJECTIVITY AND THE PERCEPTION OF VIOLENCE AS ‘READY-TO-HAND’

One of the central insights of phenomenology concerns the constitutive power of subjectivity over its objective correlates. As we have seen, consciousness is always a consciousness of something; every act of consciousness has an objective correlate. Moreover, according to Husserl, the intentional act of subjectivity determines its objective correlate in three fundamental ways: (i) *that* the conscious act presents an object, (ii) that it presents *this* object rather than that, and (iii) that it presents this object *as* something; all these three aspects are determined by the essence of the act.<sup>28</sup> In other words, subjectivity is the source of all meaning. Subjectivity is fundamentally a meaning-bestowing function. Heidegger too points to this meaning-giving function of subjectivity when he shows the *as-structure* of understanding. We understand something *as* this or that, namely, under the aspect of a meaning.<sup>29</sup> And the *as* of understanding something is in fact its “what it is for (*Wozu*).”<sup>30</sup> It is when a subject perceives violence *as* a means for achieving his ends that the possibility of war arises.

Though the phenomenon of violence exists on the plane of nature, war is a phenomenon on the plane of culture. The fundamental distinction between nature and culture lies in the fact that the latter is a sphere of human meanings, while the former is the sphere of dead facts. Human meanings arise as subjectivity relates to objects of nature; it is in the very

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<sup>28</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigation V: On Intentional Experiences and their ‘Contents’* in *Logical Investigations*, trans. J.N. Findlay (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), §30. (Hereafter referred to as LI).

<sup>29</sup> Heidegger writes: “In dealing with what is environmentally ready-to-hand by interpreting it circumspectively, we ‘see’ it as a table, a door, a carriage, or a bridge” (*Being and Time* p. 189) It is true that Heidegger is speaking here exclusively about objects in the physical environment; however, in so far as he claims that this *as-structure* is universal for all understanding, we can extend it to also our understanding of violence. In relating to phenomenon of violence humans have already seen it as having a *Wozu*, a meaning. Here we have the peculiar phenomenon of one aspect of human subjectivity (violence) is understood by subjectivity itself in its meaning-giving function as a means for achieving its aims.

<sup>30</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 189

nature of this relation that it occurs through meaning. War presupposes a particular way of perceiving violence- a meaning-bestowal on violence- and a conscious manipulation of violence in the light of the possibilities opened up by this new meaning-bestowal. War is born when violence is perceived as a means for achieving one's objectives and used as such. As a cultural phenomenon it is based on the bestowal of meaning on violence by subjectivity. The basic meaning that is bestowed on violence is its instrumental meaning; violence is perceived as an instrument for achieving one's aims.<sup>31</sup>

It is to be noted that the meaning-giving function of subjectivity involved in perception of violence as an instrument for achieving one's goals is not a function of the subjectivity that is operative in explicit cognition. Overy points out that "historians and social and political scientists (and many anthropologists and archeologists) are more likely to explore warfare in terms of human cognition, with mankind as creator of the cultures that sustain warfare and human beings as conscious agents in pursuit of objectives that can vary widely in terms of time and place."<sup>32</sup> He classifies such motives of war under four broad categories: resources, belief, power and security. It is true that modern warfare is executed on the basis of very high level of intellectual operations such as data collection, analysis, planning, calculation etc. However, such explicitly cognitional activities in deployment of violence are 'founded' on a more basic level of subjectivity, which Heidegger called 'circumspective dealings' with things where things reveal themselves as 'ready-to-hand', as things to be used and not as things 'known'.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Hannah Arendt maintains that "violence is by nature instrumental". (Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich: 1969) 25. However, this may be disputed in the light of recent psychological and neurological studies, which show that violence can occur outside the framework of "means-end" meaning. Cf. John Archer, "The Nature of Human Aggression, *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry* 32 (2009): 202-8

<sup>32</sup> Overy, *Why War?* 5.

<sup>33</sup> For Heidegger's analysis of the "founded nature" of cognition on a more basic level of subjectivity cf. *Being and Time* §13.

In primitive societies, that is, in societies before the emergence of organized political institutions like the state, tribal communities raided an ‘enemy’ as a group in order to achieve their collective purposes. In one of his famous pronouncements on war Clausewitz characterizes modern war as continuation of politics (polity) by other means.<sup>34</sup> Thus war, whether, in primitive societies or in modern societies involves the use of violence for achieving one’s aims, or an instrumentalization of violence.

The above-mentioned initial act of meaning-bestowal on violence is not the only meaning giving acts involved in war. Modern war involves perception management on a very large scale. This has become necessary because of the modern moral sensibility for which use of violence on another human being for achieving one’s selfish goals is repugnant, especially when innocent civilians become victims of war. Therefore, it becomes necessary for the planners and prosecutors of war to keep the domestic and world public opinion on their side. So, they use euphemism to hide the violent nature of the conflict; they evoke nationalistic pride and patriotic frenzy to change the perceptions of war. They use euphemerism like ‘taking out the enemy’, for killing a person on the other side, they speak of ‘friendly fire’ and ‘collateral damage’ for unintended damage inflicted on one’s own side. All these show that meaning-giving function of subjectivity has become an essential part of modern warfare.<sup>35</sup>

## **6. WAR AND THE ‘CATEGORIZATION’ OF PEOPLE AS ‘FRIEND’ AND ‘FOE’**

One essential pre-condition for a coalitional violence, that is war, to take place is experiencing people as being divided into one’s friends, with

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<sup>34</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Col. J.J. Graham (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & C., 1918). 23

<sup>35</sup> For detailed treatment of how modern warfare seeks to manage perception by decking up violence in more acceptable meanings, see Chris Hedges, *War is a Force that Gives Us Meaning*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2002), especially the first chapter named ‘The Myth of War.’

whom one feels solidarity and foes, against whom one has antagonistic feelings. As Overy has noted, without such a division "... wars would not happen. Defining enemy from friend is a critical element in understanding how wars have arisen throughout history, and why they have so often been pursued in devastatingly violent and exterminatory terms."<sup>36</sup> In his 1932 work *Concept of the Political*, the German legal philosopher Carl Schmitt observed that "humankind divides its world into 'friend' and 'foe'. Can phenomenology throw light on such sociological observations?

We believe that such sociological facts derive their ultimate clarification from Heidegger's phenomenological explication of *Mitsein* (Being-with) as a constitutive element (*existentiale*) of human way of being, and "being for and against one another" as possible modes of this *Mitsein*. According to Heidegger "Dasein-with remains existentially constitutive for the Being-in-the-world".<sup>37</sup> And this Being-with others "does not have the character of a Being-present-at-hand-along-'with' them within the world. This 'with' is something of the character of Dasein."<sup>38</sup> Thus human existence is always and already an inter-subjective existence; man is already and always related to other human beings. Heidegger also hints at the possibility of this *Mitsein* to be diversified into different modes of being-with, such as 'being for one another', 'being against one another' etc. Heidegger writes, "Being for, against, or without one another, passing one another by, not "mattering" to one another- these are possible ways of solicitude. And, it is precisely these last-named deficient and Indifferent modes that characterize everyday, average Being-with-one-another."<sup>39</sup>

Husserl also speaks of our ways of relating to other people in "subjective orientations" as our friends and neighbors with whom we make a

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<sup>36</sup> Overy, *Why War?* 63.

<sup>37</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 157.

<sup>38</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 154.

<sup>39</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 158.

community with ourselves as the central member. “Man finds over and against himself other human beings as his “neighbor, namely, as member of an intimate community. He himself belongs to it and understands himself subjectively as its zero-member... Man has over and against himself his proximate community and at the same time his neighbor as units of this community, and has this proximate community as central member for more a comprehensive community, which in its turn can again become central member of more comprehensive ones”<sup>40</sup>. Thus, phenomenologically seen, we do not experience other people simply as other beings like us, but in “subjective orientation” as our neighbor; and we organize the social world around us, as a friendly community to which we belong as the central member around whom others are organized. In other words, we experience ourselves as belonging to communities such as family, village, state etc.

The in-group formation and intensification of solidarity within it goes hand in hand with a parallel act of understanding others who do not belong to the in-group as ‘enemy.’ (It is worth mentioning here that enemy (*inimicus*) etymologically means ‘not a friend’.) The very factors that contribute to the deeper identification between members of the in-group such as shared values, common goals, language etc. function as means to establish the otherness of the other group: the other is the one who does not share our values, goals, language etc. It has also been pointed out that the in-group sets itself up as a moral unity superior to the other group. The out-group can be denigrated or dehumanized to reinforce the sense of belonging, even the sense of superiority of the in-group. Such mutual prejudices, hatred and contempt of the groups need not necessarily lead to violence and war. As Overy points out “such dehumanization of the enemy makes such violence appear legitimate ... removing any sense of guilt at inflicting harm. It is a short step from dehumanization to demonization, in which the enemy seems possessed

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<sup>40</sup> Edmund Husserl, “Wert des Lebens. Wert der Welt. Sittlichkeit (Tugend) und Glückseligkeit”, ed. U. Melle, *Husserl Studies* 13, (1997), 206.

of threatening powers to which a violent response seems the only remedy.”<sup>41</sup>

The extraordinary sense of group solidarity experienced by combatants in war has been amply recorded in literature. According to Frantz Fanon, in military action “individualism is the first value to disappear; in its stead, we find a kind of group coherence which is more intensely felt and proves to be much stronger ... bond than all the varieties of friendship, civil or private.”<sup>42</sup> Such comradeship and feeling of oneness is felt not only by the combatants but by the entire group (in modern warfare the state) on behalf of which the combatants fight. The following passage written by Edmund Husserl at the end of 1914, when the First World War was raging, tells us how everything that separates people melts away during war time and how people become united in a community of sympathy, pride and a common will. The passage also tells us how such a unity is unthinkable during peace time. Husserl writes:

People here become closer with each other, the all-too human element, which separated people, melts away, a community of sympathy, a community of pride, and a common will, in short, a living sociality is present here to such a degree and tied together with such intensity, as one could not have suspected and believed to be possible. That is the effect of 'militarism,' that is the effect of the war ... <sup>43</sup>

An associated phenomenon is that such sense of solidarity and oneness with the in-group also makes people ready to undertake great sacrifices for the sake of the group. In a letter to Roman Ingarden in 1917, the philosopher Edith Stein who served as a dedicated nurse at the warfront throughout the First World War and would be later assistant to Edmund Husserl at Freiburg University reports how the War inspired her to dedicate herself to the German nation: "today [day of mobilization in

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<sup>41</sup> Overy, 66.

<sup>42</sup> Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, cited in Hannah Arendt, *On Violence*, 196.

<sup>43</sup> Cited in Nicolas de Warren and Thomas Vongehr (ed.), *Philosophers at the Front: Phenomenology and the First World War*, 24.

1914] my individual life ceased, and everything who I am belongs to the state. Should I survive the war, I would then want to begin my life anew based on this conviction" <sup>44</sup>.

War as organized group violence presupposes the phenomenon of group formation and this in turn presupposes very developed capacity for communication (emergence of language) and co-ordination. The dynamics of group formation has been studied by phenomenologists. The ultimate phenomenological basis for group formation is *existentiale of Mit-sein* of Dasein, analyzed by Heidegger in *Being and Time*.

## CONCLUSION

Usually what is done under the name of phenomenology of war is the phenomenological description of how violence affects human beings; they are description from the standpoint of the victims of war. But in the present article we have directed our investigation towards subjectivity that makes war as coalitional, purposive inter-group violence possible. We have looked into the subjective performances that constitute war as coalitional, purposive violence. In our investigation we have found that war is not a phenomenon of nature, but of culture. It is constituted, first, by subjectivity's meaning-bestowal function when it perceives violence as an instrument for attaining one's goals. The second constitutive structure of subjectivity that is essential for making the phenomenon of war possible is the interpretation of other human beings as friend or foe and formation of in-groups and out-groups on the basis of that interpretation. The results of our investigation open up the possibility for answering positively the question that Einstein posed to Freud: 'Is there a way of delivering mankind from the menace of war?' Freud's answer to the question was in the negative: since aggressive instinct is part of human nature, there is no way of removing it, and thus no way of avoiding the possibility of war. According to Freud there are only some indirect methods of mitigating the possibility of war, such as bringing

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 229.

‘Eros into play against it (the Death Instinct).<sup>45</sup> However, the results of our investigation show that possible ways are open to humanity to escape the menace of war. Since war is based fundamentally on the perception of violence as a means for attaining one’s aims, a different meaning-bestowal on violence can avoid the possibility of the instrumentalization of violence. We can disabuse ourselves of the instrumental way of perceiving violence. We can put into operation other non-violent ways of attaining our group objectives such as dialogue and communication. We can question the very concept of instrumental-rationality, as Habermas has shown, and come to live by communicative rationality, making possible attainment of goals without violence on the other. Moreover, mindful of the fact that exclusionary perceptions of others as enemy are at the basis of war and violence, and being aware that such perceptions are often occasioned by our unreasonable prejudices, we can put into operation measures that bring people closer to each other through dialogue and communication so that prejudices are removed and more inclusive communities are formed at local, national and international levels. In short, a phenomenology of war can contribute towards the creation of a more peaceful world.

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<sup>45</sup>Cf. Freud, 359.