War As Pure Negation: Positivity In the Mode of War

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Abstract
Defined existentially, war is the mode in which one orients oneself entirely toward destruction. I consider that existence in this mode poses a paradox to the individual: if one submits to the logic of war in order to survive, one must contend with the dilemma of resolving two disparate identities—the identity one held before war, and the identity one held while within the mode of war. The paper illustrates the ways in which the latter involves a logical rejection of the former, and consequently that a resolution of the two seems at best to be undesirable and, at worst, impossible. “Survival” in the mode of war, then, involves a profound dismissal of the self as one truly defines oneself, and is ultimately not survival at all. Therefore, I argue, a rejection of the logic of war—and, as a result, a rejection of destruction overall—is necessary in order to properly retain one’s individual identity. I explore this argument through the lenses of Emmanuel Levinas’s and Martin Buber’s philosophies of alterity, Jean-Paul Sartre’s existential conundrums, and the contemporary socio-political conflict described in the journalistic fiction of Slavenka Drakulic.

War may be defined in part as that state of being in which action is completely directed towards destruction. This destruction can be physical or psychical. It can be physical in two rather obvious senses: by the annihilation of either material objects (cities, power sources, etc.) or actual living organisms. It can be psychical in the sense of the annihilation of the kind of psycho-spiritual qualities which are typically identified as constitutive of human agents: personality, identity, relationships, beliefs, etc. This paper focuses on the latter case.

I argue that psychical destruction is necessarily the first and last case of destruction in the state of war, for upon its initiation war psychically transforms the individual, and does the same upon its end. Further, psychical destruction, rather than physical, is the intended end and purpose of war. Physical destruction might be said to be a mere means by which psychical destruction can be facilitated. Understanding what this psychical transformation entails may allow
for a greater grasp of the effect of war on individuals and how this effect gives warfare (and those political agents which perpetuate it) its power. As a result, it may be possible to arrive at a proper response to the mode of war in which the status of the individual as a single, continuous agent may be maintained and the “logic of war” can be avoided.

The Primary Characteristics of Psychical Destruction

Despite the intimate and minute details of her novel S., Slavenka Drakulic provides an enlighteningly broad picture of the ways in which individuals, while in the mode of war, undergo personal deconstruction. The most fundamental of these is the distancing of the individual from the human community by placing a focus on the individual’s relation and association with some group that stands in opposition to another group. By definition war divides the human community into parts, which subsequently seek to negate one another; any geographical or national context with which the individual associates his or her identity is promptly shifted toward that group which represents this context. Despite the complexities of human associations and the myriad potential sources of identity, war is reductive on this matter (as it will show to be in many cases), categorizing individuals only in terms of those groups engaging in war. So in the midst of a war between Serbs and Muslims in Bosnia, Drakulic’s character S. finds herself forced into alignment with the latter despite being of mixed descent.

What follows from this categorization is the subsequent dissolution of the great multitude of characteristics that S. otherwise believed to be essential components of her identity. Her education, her former urbanite lifestyle, her family—none of these things are included in this externally imposed categorization. She is, very simply, a Muslim woman. And even those characteristics which may follow from womanhood—being a daughter, a mother, a sister—are alien in the mode of war; family means nothing in the logic of war, especially if, as with S., one is wholly isolated from one’s family or, worse, if one’s family members are no longer living. Womanhood for S. and her fellow captives is a characteristic rendered wholly undesirable, as it is the characteristic for which they are determined useful as objects of warfare.

It can be inferred then that the reductive categorizations imposed by the mode of war upon its initiation result in an isolation for the individual which is

threefold: the individual is in isolation from (1) the human community at large, (2) intimate social relationships, and (3) the self as constituted by subjectively appropriated characteristics. S., therefore, is alone, and is not even alone by herself in a manner of speaking; those parts of herself by which she defines “S.” have been rejected, or else, as with her racial or gender identity, some aspects of herself are used against her. S. is a shell, an image that was once her subjective self.

Finally, a fourth kind of isolation occurs: isolation from one’s own physical body. With the psyche, the mind, the soul, effectively diminished by the former three kinds of isolation, all that remains is one’s physical body; yet, by being subject to the control of those agents of war which seek to use the individual to accomplish its own ends, one does not retain ownership of the body. Drakulic makes clear in her account that the body of a woman, in the case of the war in Bosnia, becomes an object by which the Serbs may harm, humiliate and otherwise demoralize their enemies. S., therefore, is not even alone with her own body. Psychically diminished, she is an individual wholly without agency, without a real contextual relationship to the outer world.

Martin Buber sees this negative orientation as an inevitable component of the human being’s relationship with the world, but one that is violent, undesirable, and ultimately unsustainable. “One must pull and tear to turn a unity into a multiplicity,” he writes, and indeed, pulling and tearing is precisely what is done in the mode of war. “I can abstract from him the color of his hair or the color of his speech . . . but immediately he is no longer a You.”2 In other words, the deconstruction of the individual wholly objectifies him or her; a unity, and a cultivation of self, requires not a negative but a positive movement, one in which the individual reenters the world of relation.

The “Logic of War” and the Paradox of Survival

The modus operandi of war is the reshaping of individuals via their destruction; by psychically demolishing individuals, the agent of war can then reconstruct them in any image desired. This can be accomplished through the same kind of construction that Sartre describes in his Being and Nothingess. The look—which constitutes a kind of anxious realization of one’s own objectification by other subjects—involves a sophisticated denial of the subject as sole constructor of

identity. S., for example, thinks of herself as an educated, half-Serb, half-Muslim modern urban woman; these facts about herself exist independent of her own beliefs about them yet she can embrace them as aspects of her identity because she has subjectively appropriated them as such. Despite this subjective cultivation of identity, other subjects exist which, upon their own perception of her exterior behaviors and characteristics, may define her by characteristics that she deems unfavorable. For S., this is exemplified by the treatment of her Muslim background by the Serbian military.

The effect of the look is most intense, most anxiety-inducing, when we feel least in control of our own ability to manipulate it, to hold some kind of control over the way we appear to other subjects. In war, the subject lacks control to an immense degree, with the agents of war debilitating the subject to the point of inactivity or, more pointedly, a kind of activity which orients the individual toward brute physical survival. Activity becomes directed primarily at preventing physical destruction rather than psychical destruction, despite the more severe threat of the latter.

In S., Drakulic refers to the victim of war’s eventual adherence to a “logic of war,” a change in human behavior by which violence becomes a feasible response to the anguishing conditions of life. This notion is provided a pointed depiction in a moment where S. witnesses an infanticide among her fellow refugees. It is an infant conceived by rape, which its mother and grandmother believe would cause further indignity and terror should it be allowed to live. The grandmother kills the infant immediately upon birth, telling the mother soon after, “it’s better this way.”

It is better to survive, even surviving the most horrible and painful realities of war, than to die—this is the response to war which S. and her fellow victims develop, and S. herself responds to the horrors of war by exploiting the desires of a Serbian military captain. Her companions, though unable to do likewise, respond similarly to occasions in which one must choose either death or a compromised life—they choose compromise, whatever the cost.

The paradox herein is that the individual that “survives” is not, as it has been demonstrated, the same individual that existed upon war’s initiation. The identity of the individual—the personality, the narrative—has been severely damaged and in a very serious way lacks the self that used to exist. What struggles

3. Drakulic, S., 131.
4. Ibid., 128.
to survive is the mere animal of the original individual, the most basic, undeveloped ego. This ego may be physically retained, but the soul, in a sense, does not remain unaltered. Upon war’s conclusion, the individual is faced with a choice: either accept this cleaving of continuity between the pre-war and the post-war self, which seems to necessarily involve rejecting that segment of one’s identity which existed while in the mode of war, or one must somehow appropriate that self which existed in the mode of war into the post-war self. The second of these choices seems in a very real way to be impossible, logically incoherent, wholly inconsistent with that individual’s pre- and post-war identity. This is perhaps part of the reason veterans and other victims of war often choose not to speak about their experiences. There is something wholly inhuman in war, something which eradicates the self and puts in its place a new individual which can only properly exist in conditions of war.

Positivity In Alterity

Emmanuel Levinas, often writing in direct response to the solipsistic mindset war promotes, recognizes the frailty of the self in such a condition, and seeks instead for action directed radically against the individualism and animalism of sheer survival. This is because, he writes, “ethics is before ontology.” Simply put, it is not possible to cultivate the self, or at least those ontological conditions which we consider when defining the human individual, without first recognizing the other and one’s obligation to the other vis-à-vis their well-being. The ego evolves in this recognition of the other.

What is needed is a radical departure from the survival-based individualism of the negative response to war in the Levinasian vein; not an ethic of egoism, but a stark ethic of alterity and positivity. And, as Levinas emphasizes, this is not an ethic that hopes for reciprocity. “The moment one is generous in hopes of reciprocity, that relation no longer involves generosity but the commercial relation, the exchange of good behavior.” Here he splits altogether with Buber. Despite Buber’s focus on the importance of the positive relation between individuals, a relation which exposes the objectifying “it-world” as illusory and ultimately unsatisfactory, his response is, for Levinas, not potent enough. Too much fragmentation and individuation persists.

6. Ibid., 101.
Of course, one may find it even harder to find the radical moralism of Levinas practicable in the mode of war, and it would be foolish to expect those in such a condition to wholly abandon the self in favor of the other; however, what is crucial is the mere recognition of alterity, the movement away from the negativity of war and towards the positivity of activity for the sake of the other.

Drakulic, in concluding her semi-fictional account, leaves S. in the decisive moment in which the character chooses to take on the responsibility of raising her newborn son, yet another of the many infants conceived in rape. This action is surely radical, and the reader can recognize the dizzying implications of the choice, both optimistic in the sense that this child will live and may transcend the horrific conditions which birthed him, yet tragic in the sense that S. must live with the constant reminder of her past in the mode of war. Yet the powerful positivity in her decision, an act toward creation, rather than destruction, is a denial of the logic of war and, in effect a rebellion against war as a coherent mode of being. In embracing positivity, her life in this sorry state may be reconciled with her pre- and post-war characteristics, and can aid in the construction of a life which can use the destructive mode of war as an ultimately positive activity.

But it can be taken further and Levinas seeks further movement toward positivity. Whether this is possible is beside the point; again, the mode of war, intrinsically destructive, cannot be undermined by further negativity; instead, an ethic of positivity is necessary, and the alterity of Levinas’ philosophy puts us on the right track.

References