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Christopher Coker, *Barbarous Philosophers: Reflections on the Nature of War from Heraclitus to Heisenberg*. New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2010. Pp. vi, 278. ISBN 978-0-691-13581-6.

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This clever book should be read skeptically and thoughtfully. It will annoy those knowledgeable about either war or philosophy and impress those who wish they were. The former, infuriated by its many idiosyncrasies, will be too quick to toss *Barbarous Philosophers* down the nearest oubliette; the latter, overwhelmed by its confident erudition, may buy the dross along with the gold.

Human history, Christopher Coker (London School of Economics) argues, has amply demonstrated that war is an awful and dubious means of achieving policy ends: “even great powers are finding it difficult to translate a tactical success into a conclusive political outcome” (252). But rejecting war does not ensure the happy alternative of peace. In the absence of war—a regulated, if exceedingly hard to manage, activity—human conflict would manifest itself in the inefficacious horrors of what Coker dubs “warfare.” One recalls Hiliare Belloc’s admonition to small children: “And always keep a-hold of Nurse,/ for fear of finding something worse.”¹

Coker describes warfare as a primeval human activity, the use of violence by one group of people to despoil others of lives and possessions. It is a natural behavior devoid of legal or moral context: “usually hunter-gatherers don’t think about conflict at all—each round of fighting provides sufficient motivation for the next” (24). War, on the other hand, is a contest invented and set to rules by the Greeks. Unlike warfare, it has heroes, those who excel within set parameters. More broadly,

the escape from the world of warfare into that of war transforms zero-sum competition into non zero-sum competitiveness.... [W]arfare does not have battles; wars by contrast are remembered because of them.... War fathers change—it generates it (it is generative—like a father it gives birth). Warfare doesn’t; there is no change in the state of nature where people find themselves stuck in a permanent present where there is no flux, only chaos.... Because warfare is static, it offers no better future; war allows one to imagine, even strive for, peace.” (16, 26, 51, 60)

If warfare has existed since time immemorial, war is a more recent invention. Its inventors were not soldiers but, in the words of Slavoj Žižek, a “military-poetic complex,” to which Coker adds philosophers (100). Rousseau complained that philosophers invented war to manage otherwise purposeless violence (4–5). But not every belligerent has heeded the philosophers: “the Nazis did not fight war; they practiced warfare” (160). Over time, war has lost its efficacy as a political tool—“the world is simply too complex for it to deliver its traditional pay-offs” (9), but combat goes on nonetheless. Apparently, people continue to make war because the philosophers have “retreated into language games” and stopped thinking about war (8–9).

The contention that nations still fight because modern philosophers have failed to perceive that war cannot solve political problems rests uneasily alongside Coker’s concluding exhortation to heed the older philosophers in order to keep war within the rules. “If we ignore the Kantian imperatives, we end up with Guantanamo Bay..., if we ignore St. Augustine’s insight that peace is a contested concept, we are likely to conclude that the peace for which we are fighting is an incontestable good” (257). This patent contradiction is at the heart of this book’s argument: since peace is impossible, we must find a way to restore war’s utility. Indeed, Coker craves romance as well as mere utility. The claim that “Kant has a lot to answer for by encouraging us to distrust the warrior” implies nostalgia for the days of the true warrior, “who adheres to the Homeric tradition” and defines his ethos in terms of “precision and restraint” (188).

1. From “Jim,” in *Cautionary Tales for Children* (London: E. Nash, 1907).

Coker gets to this point via a whirlwind tour of philosophy. He bases his distinction between war and warfare on Clausewitz's assertion that war has a universal and timeless nature, while its character changes in response to historical situations (11–12). He then looks back, through Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, to the ancient Greeks, whom he credits with distinguishing warfare as fought by barbarians from war as a contest controlled by culturally imposed rules. He moves so smoothly from Aristotle's logic of opposites by way of Pythagorean principles to his own discrimination of war (limited, symmetrical, state, and irregular) from warfare (unlimited, asymmetrical, non-state, and regular) that Aristotle appears to be the author of the war vs. warfare division (22). Coker then co-opts Thucydides for his argument by stressing the Greek historian's crucial observation that *polemos* (war) becomes *stasis* (warfare)" (22–23).

There follow brief chapters on Plato, Aristotle, Tacitus, St. Augustine, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Montesquieu, Kant, Hegel, Marx, Engels, Nietzsche, and Heisenberg, showing how each reinforced the idea that war (but not warfare) is a part of human intercourse and can be compatible with ethical behavior.

The nuggets in this analysis are buried under a daunting weight of dross. The biggest problem with the master distinction between "warfare" and "war" is semantic. Even Coker himself uses the words interchangeably. For example, he has hunter-gatherers both engaging in "warfare" and "going to war"—a flagrant violation of his thesis (24). Similarly, he writes that Hitler's regime practiced not war but warfare (160; cf. 229), but later that Hitler's Germans "ensured that war could not be good practice" by mistreating their Russian prisoners of war (187).

The putative contrast between *polemos* and *stasis* in classical Greek is even more suspect than that between war and warfare. *Polemos* means "war," but *stasis* denotes "civil strife" and lacks any intrinsic connection to war or warfare. This is an egregious error, in large part reflecting the intractable difficulty of Coker's chosen problem. Thucydides's narrative contains everything one needs to know about war, but it cannot be reduced to a single message in either Greek or English. While Coker does violence to both language and reality, his valuable failure does at least illustrate an enduring human preference for taming war over abolishing it.

Coker thinks war is a positive phenomenon, whose ugly and unmanageable aspects can be banished to the sphere of "warfare"; he cheerfully asserts that "people since time immemorial have fought against tyranny" (30); war is "the means to self-knowledge" (75); "death in war is life-affirming" (83); and "even a conscripted soldier can find war personally redeeming" (237). That Coker can enlist a body of philosophical thought to support such claims does not make them unproblematic.

While the book's troubling statements on major issues yet provoke interest and reward discussion, seemingly smaller errors of fact are more disquieting and carry the author over the line between the breezy from the slapdash. Pace Coker, the novel is not really the most recent art form (94); bungee jumping hardly exemplifies "risk taken on the basis of training and skill" (164); and the trial at Athens after the battle of the Arginusae Islands (406 BC) concerned neither twelve drowned Athenian sailors nor twelve generals (86).

For all of its shortcomings, *Barbarous Philosophers* is both entertaining and thought-provoking. It helpfully surveys a fascinating range of philosophical ideas. And, although it abounds with challenging passages—for example, "every war in changing in character transforms its past and appropriates it at the same time. The nature of war is not transformed through history, its nature is made manifest in time, but time does not substantially affect the eternal; the character of war is the actualization of its nature" (13)—the result is surprisingly readable.

The inclusions and omissions in Coker's eclectic bibliography are very revealing. Few of his sources treat war *per se*, a subject about which his intended audience surely has its own opinions. But that audience is less likely to be so well versed in philosophy as to notice how often he cites literature *about* philosophers rather than *by* them: readers will be unsure whether he is quoting, say, Jean Jacques Rousseau's own words or those of Katrin Froese on Rousseau (4). The bibliography leans heavily towards twenty-first-century ma-

terial, offering both insight into Coker's recent reading habits and a shopping list for those wishing to be similarly up to date.²

Ultimately, this book is significant as evidence of war's attractiveness, at least in the ideal, and of the lengths to which intelligent and morally sophisticated people will go to present it as a positive force. Coker exaggerates the agency of philosophers in the process, as in his rather inscrutable claim that "Philosophy has never allowed military science to become an independent area of enquiry, nor could it—because if we were ever able to make war an independent enquiry (an enquiry independent of philosophy) the independent enquirers would have to confront philosophy all over again at the limits of their advance" (246). But philosophy, like religion, political science, economics, evolutionary biology, psychology, and many other categories of intellectual endeavor, has participated in the project of advertising the benefits of war. In this sense, Coker is right to separate war from warfare. But the difference is not between two kinds of actual conflict—one heroic but purposeful, the other vicious and destructive—but between a fantasy of controlled violence and the ugly reality of warfare.

2. Sadly, the bibliography omits some of the works cited, and the laconic parenthetical references in the main text are often mysterious: e.g., "Waterfield, p. 37" (16); "Maier, 1993" (65); "Meir, 2003" (68). Note that "Woodruff, 1993" may only be found under the entry "Thucydides."