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War and Techne

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"Today, the United States enjoys a position of unparalleled military strength and great economic and political influence. In keeping with our heritage and principles, we do not use our strength to press for unilateral advantage. We seek instead to create a balance of power that favors human freedom." This programmatic statement comes very near the beginning of the "National Military Strategy" announced by the White House in September 2002. The document also asserts, however, a commitment to military forces "strong enough to dissuade potential adversaries from pursuing a military build-up in hopes of surpassing, or equaling, the power of the United States"—a goal that may rest a bit uneasily beside the renunciation of unilateral advantage.

The United States is, at present, the world's most powerful nation and the country most able to wage total war, but it would like to think of itself as—simultaneously—the country least likely to do so. There is something to that self-assessment, but it would not be hard to respond to it with a degree of cynicism. For, after all, when it was the only nation capable of waging atomic war, the United States did just that, and the President who made the final call is supposed to have said he never lost a night's sleep over the decision. Whatever the inconsistencies that may be present in our National Military Strategy or in our national character, it is surely good that a nation as powerful as ours—now, even, thought of as imperial—should regularly think and rethink its strategic aims and the lengths to which it is prepared to go in pursuit of those aims.

At a time when some thought we had moved into a new world order in which questions other than military strategy would dominate attention, events have forced exactly the opposite, and from many angles we seem to be grasping for new clarity in our approach to war. Most of these are new angles on old problems—as we try, for example, to think through the circumstances in which a first (preemptive) strike would be morally permissible in a terrorist age where attack comes with little warning from quarters that are, in some sense, private rather than public. Or trying to think through what moral use, if any, we may have for a nuclear arsenal. Nuclear weapons have been with us for more than half a century, and we still have difficulty bringing them under the sway of the morality of war. In his profound and influential book *Just and Unjust Wars*, first published as long ago as 1977, Michael Walzer wrote that "[n]uclear weapons explode the theory of just war. They are the first of mankind's technological innovations that are simply not

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encompassable within the familiar moral world." Perhaps so, though I am not fully persuaded of that. Our deepest problems, however, may come not from the weapons themselves, the fruit of our technological genius, but from the moral realities of war, which may not be so different from what they have always been.

The Meaning of War

There was a time when the tools of war were a sword in one hand and a shield in the other. Yet, some of our culture's most profound reflections on the meaning of war come from that time. In a brilliant essay, Simone Weil describes the *Iliad* as "the poem of force." She considers what the poem has to teach us about the effects of force—both on those who are conquered and those who conquer—and we may profit from rehearsing some aspects of her analysis.

Force "turns anybody who is subjected to it into a *thing*," into a natural object, she writes. The extreme example of this comes when the use of force produces a corpse—a body that has become nothing more than a thing, because the breath of life is no longer in it. No doubt that is terrible, but it is not for Weil the most terrible thing. We today find terrible only that war kills, that it creates corpses, but there can be something worse—a living "thing." Those who are on the receiving end of force can be turned into things even *before* they become corpses—while they can still know and dread what is happening to them. "An extraordinary entity this—a thing that has a soul." Thus, Homer gives us images of those at whose heart the sword is pointed: On their knees begging for life. Entirely at the disposal of their enemy.

Weil notes what existentialists such as Sartre once emphasized, that anyone who is near us "exercises a certain power over us by his very presence." There is often in human interaction an endlessly shifting battle between two subjects, with the presence of each threatening to objectify the other. But this process of objectification comes to full term at the point of a sword.

> Thus spoke the brilliant son of Priam
> In begging words …
> Dropping his spear, he knelt down, holding out his arms.
> Achilles, drawing his sharp sword, struck
> Through the neck and breastbone. The two-edged sword
> Sunk home its full length. The other, face down,
> Lay still, and the black blood ran out, wetting the ground.

This surely does not mean that force should never be used, nor that it does not often serve the cause of justice. Yet, Weil's anguished—and sometimes extreme—sensibility helps us see the price force exacts from us. It is a price paid first and most obviously by those on whom force is used, the conquered, and they pay this price not only if they die but also, perhaps even more acutely, when they do not. "The idea of a person's being a thing is a logical contradiction. Yet what is impossible in logic becomes true in life, and the contradiction lodged within the soul tears it to shreds."

This much might seem evident to most of us, even if we lacked Weil's poetic attentiveness to the *Iliad*'s depiction. What might be less evident to us, however, is the effect force has not on the conquered but on the conqueror, not on those against whom it is used but on those who use it. And the effect, paradoxically, is precisely the same. They too become things—natural objects. "Force is as pitiless to the man who possesses it, or thinks he does, as it is to its victims; the second it crushes, the first it intoxicates." Weil depicts this intoxicating power in a number of ways, and it will be instructive for us to note briefly the different ways force enslaves also the man who possesses it.

Just as the one at whom the sword is pointed is transformed into a thing, into "inert matter," even so the one whose hand is on the sword becomes—or, we should say, being a little more careful than Weil sometimes is, may become—"pure momentum" or "blind force," rather than an ensouled human being. The soldier, even the conquering and victorious soldier, faces death in every moment and has at his disposal the life or death of others. Thus, "every morning, the soul castrates itself of aspiration," losing "all conceptions of purpose or goal, including even its own 'war aims.'"

I will take time later to qualify and question the scope of Weil's claims, but, if we are not just to place our faith in *techne*, we need to absorb something of the power of her vision. One who, using force, has become pure momentum will find it hard to know when to stop or what limits to respect. Even the human countenance, the face of the enemy, may not suffice. It is hard to respect life in another "when you have had to castrate yourself of all yearning for it." The "other" no longer sets a limit to our projects. The "presence" of another no longer has that indefinable effect on us when the other has become object rather than subject. Other people no longer impose on us "that interval of hesitation" which truly human presence and action require.

Most of all, Weil notes, users of force, having themselves become "blind force," count on it too much. They "have no suspicion of the fact that the consequences of their deeds will at length come home to them—they too will bow the neck in their turn." They come to want everything, forgetting "one detail, that *everything* is not within their power." Weil reminds us that at the end of just the first day's combat in the *Iliad*, the Greek forces might be thought almost to have achieved their war aim. They are on the verge of being able to take Helen back. But by that evening, at the end of a successful day's fighting, "the Greeks are no longer interested in her." It now seems that Troy itself is within their grasp, on the very brink of capture and destruction—and that now becomes their goal. "What they want is, in fact, everything."

But success is always momentary in the *Iliad*. What sometimes baffles or bores us as readers—the way in which the fortunes of war seem to swing back and forth from day to day as rosy-fingered dawn comes—suggests to Weil the

deepest truth, that victory is always "a transitory thing." Even seeming victors always have force only "on loan from fate." And all finally share the same fate. "Ares is just, and kills those who kill." Hence, the world of the *Iliad* is not really divided between conquerors and conquered, between those who possess force and those who are possessed by it. There is, finally, only one sort of person. Not those who possess and those who are possessed by force. "The truth is, nobody really possesses it."

I suggested above that these claims need qualification, and Weil herself provides the beginnings of such nuance. She acknowledges, in fact, that a "moderate use of force" is not impossible for those who have taken up the sword, but she thinks this will require a "superhuman virtue, which is as rare as dignity in weakness." She evokes "luminous moments" in the poem "in which man possesses his soul." These are moments of courage and love—familial, marital, among friends, among comrades-in-arms, even, let us note, "the purest triumph of love, the crowning grace of war, … the friendship that floods the hearts of mortal enemies." Aged Priam comes, a suppliant, to beg Achilles for the body of his son, Hector:

> But when thirst and hunger had been appeased,
> Then Dardanian Priam fell to admiring Achilles.
> How tall he was, and handsome; he had the face of a god;
> And in his turn Dardanian Priam was admired by Achilles,
> Who watched his handsome face and listened to his words.

But such possibilities are, Weil thinks, rare "moments of grace" in what is more often "a picture of uniform horror," and "a soul which has entered the province of force will not escape this except by a miracle. Such miracles are rare and of brief duration."

I suspect that they are considerably less rare than Weil supposes. In *Just and Unjust Wars*, Michael Walzer has a short discussion of what he calls "naked soldiers"—a discussion of instances he has culled from war memoirs in which, repeatedly, "a soldier on patrol or on sniper duty catches an enemy soldier unaware, holds him in his gunsight, easy to kill, and then must decide whether to shoot him or let the opportunity pass." And the instances Walzer collects show us soldiers—caught in the field of force, who must castrate themselves of aspiration every morning—who, nevertheless, turn out to be reluctant to shoot. Even though the enemy soldier, because he is a soldier, is always a legitimate target, in such unguarded moments the human countenance of the enemy is almost impossible to overlook. This suggests that something a little less than "superhuman virtue" may suffice to set some limits on what we do in war.

We can press our qualifications of Weil's claims yet further by noting something peculiar about her perceptive essay. What, one might ask a reader, should

we conclude from the essay? Is it an argument for pacifism? An argument that the *techne* of war, though the invention of our genius, is not within our control and must be eschewed if we do not want to become "things"? One might read the essay that way, but, having asked students to read it many times over the years, I find that it seems to them much more complex—as it should. It is just as plausible to take from the essay an indication of the importance of one of the central claims of the morality of just war.

From the fact that all share the same fate, from the fact that victory is transitory, from the fact that conquerors and conquered face the same ultimate danger of being "thingified," Weil draws a conclusion that lies, we might note, at the heart of just war theory. From this analysis of the world of force "springs the idea of a destiny before which executioner and victim stand equally innocent, before which conquered and conqueror are brothers in the same distress." Weil notes "the extraordinary sense of equity which breathes through the *Iliad* … One is barely aware that the poet is a Greek and not a Trojan."

The point is not that war must never be waged. Say that, and we relinquish too readily the claims of justice in human life. Nor is the point that war, even necessary war, must be waged with a bad conscience. If we find ourselves in circumstances in which waging war is the right thing to do, then we should do so with a good conscience. What we learn from Weil is not that warriors must always have a bad conscience, but that, if war is waged, it must be done with the kind of hesitation and caution appropriate before one enters this field of force. And when war is waged, it must be done in ways that recognize and honor the human countenance of the enemy. These limitations are at the heart of the morality of just war as it has developed over centuries in our culture. They require us to think of war as more than *techne*, and they spring quite naturally from Weil's analysis, even though that same analysis undermines any too easy confidence that we are capable of placing moral limits on our technical capacities—that we can possess the force that constantly threatens to possess us. "Only he who has measured the dominion of force, and knows how not to respect it, is capable of love and justice."

Because she thought that the *Iliad* was unsurpassed in depicting this central aspect of the human condition, Weil characterized it as "the only true epic the Occident possesses." In particular, and of interest for my purposes here, she writes that "the Romans had no epics" and could not, because they "saw their country as the nation chosen by destiny to be mistress of the world," and, therefore, could never have conceived of "a destiny before which executioner and victim stand equally innocent."

The Epic of Empire

No Roman epic? What, we might ask, of the *Aeneid*? Turning briefly to it will, in fact, enrich our reflection on the degree to which a certain kind of humility is need-

ed if one is safely to enter the field of force. There can be no doubt, of course, that a sense of destiny does pervade Vergil's epic tale. Its famous opening lines sing of arms and a man who "came to Italy by destiny … / Till he could found a city." And not just any man, but *pius* Aeneas, who knows himself to be "the man / Whom heaven calls."

To be sure, the *Aeneid* does not disguise the way in which force makes objects of the conquered, and Vergil can evoke this truth hauntingly—as, for example, when he tells how Turnus, leader of the Italian forces who fight against the invading Trojans, kills

> Menoetës, hater of war—his hatred vain.
> A fisherman in his Arcadian youth,
> He had his poor hut near the brooks of Lerna,
> Crowded with perch, and knew no seats of power.
> His father tilled a plot of rented land.

But he died, just the same, the simplicity of his life caught up in others' desire for greatness. The crucial passage—and problem—for understanding the nature of force in the *Aeneid*, however, a passage about which scholarly debate is not likely to cease, comes in the poem's concluding lines.

Much earlier, in Book VI of the *Aeneid*, journeying into the underworld, Aeneas finds his father, Anchises, who shows him the future greatness of the Roman people whom Aeneas is destined to found. Other peoples, Anchises says, may excel in art, argument, or astrology, but Roman greatness will lie elsewhere: in the arts of rule; in the use of force, but the controlled use of force.

> Roman, remember by your strength to rule
> Earth's peoples—for your arts are to be these:
> To pacify, to impose the rule of law,
> To spare the conquered, battle down the proud.

To spare the conquered—not as a rare "moment of grace" or "miracle," but as the characteristic of a people in arms. To ride the waves of the field of force and not be ridden by them. So to control *techne* by the power of soul that one does not become "pure momentum." This is what it means to be Roman—perhaps especially, Vergil probably means, in the age of Augustus.

How, then, are we to read the end of the poem, when Aeneas, governed it might seem more by *furor* than by *pietas*, slays Turnus? Here, if ever, it looks as if we have a classic example of both conquered and conqueror becoming mere things—inert matter and blind momentum. Aeneas runs his sword through Turnus' thigh, bringing him to his knees.

> The man brought down, brought low, lifted his eyes
> And held his right hand out to make his plea:
> "Clearly, I earned this, and I ask no quarter.

Make the most of your good fortune here.
If you can feel a father's grief—and you, too,
Had such a father in Anchises—then
Let me bespeak your mercy for old age
In Daunus [father of Turnus], and return me, or my body,
Stripped, if you will, of life, to my own kin.
You have defeated me. The Ausonians [Latins]
Have seen me in defeat, spreading my hands.
Lavinia is your bride. But go no further
Out of hatred.

Aeneas pauses, experiencing, perhaps, that "interval of hesitation" before the humanity even of the conquered enemy. And what a moment that pause is. A moment in which, perhaps, the character of Roman empire hangs in the balance. He has "battle[d] down the proud." Will he now also "remember," as Anchises had advised, "to spare the conquered"?

Having paused, having stayed his hand for a moment, Aeneas suddenly notices that Turnus is wearing the swordbelt of young Pallas, whom he had killed in battle—Pallas, whom Aeneas had loved and for whom he had taken responsibility.

Aeneas raged at the relic of his anguish
Worn by this man as trophy. Blazing up
And terrible in his anger, he called out:
"You in your plunder, torn from one of mine,
Shall I be robbed of you? This wound will come
From Pallas: Pallas makes this offering
And from your criminal blood exacts his due."
He sank his blade in fury in Turnus' chest.
Then all the body slackened in death's chill,
And with a groan for that indignity
His spirit fled into the gloom below.

And with those words the poem ends—in what we can only regard as studied ambiguity.

What is the meaning of this ending for the Rome of Vergil's day, the empire of Augustus? Aeneas has fulfilled his destiny—or, perhaps even we should say, powers greater than Aeneas have brought that desired outcome to pass. With Turnus out of the way, peace will now be possible. Native Latins and invading Trojans will learn to live together and will forge Roman greatness—a greatness founded in large measure in a rule of imperial law that does not hesitate to bring retributive justice upon those who deserve it. Therein lies Aeneas' greatness as Vergil might be said to depict it: Aeneas does not shrink back from the world of force, but puts it to good purposes.

But does such an ending—if this is its meaning—really display *pietas*, Roman greatness as Anchises had described it? This must have been Simone Weil's

question about the *Aeneid*, part of her reason for regarding it as inferior to the *Iliad*. For, in the end, great Aeneas does not seem able to exercise the "superhuman virtue" that would enable him to possess, and not be possessed by, force. In the end he is governed more by *furor* than *pietas*, and the greatness that spares the conquered exists only in Anchises' imagination. That is surely a possible alternative reading of the poem's final lines.

Perhaps, then, Vergil's great epic does not aim only to magnify the greatness of Augustus' Rome but also to sound a note of caution or, even, warning. Anchises' vision is one possible Rome, but so is the end of the *Aeneid*. For given precisely the opportunity to spare the suppliant, Aeneas—in a moment of blind momentum—does the opposite. From that picture of human possibilities and dangers, Vergil might be read to say, any ruler should learn.

Learn what? Let us be clear: rulers should not learn to avoid the use of force, for then, precisely as rulers, they do no good. Indeed, to turn from classical thought to Christian, John Calvin was not mistaken to suggest (in the graphic idiom of an earlier age) that the magistrate who refuses to bloody his sword dishonors God. The lesson we need to draw from Weil's analysis is not that the world of force should be off limits, but that, plumbed to its depths, it teaches us the limits and dangers of *techne* alone. Force there will always be—and must be. Yet, only when the enemy is seen as, also and finally, one of us, can we even hope for the virtue (which, if not superhuman, is surely exacting) that keeps us from becoming things and, thereby, preserves our humanity. This requires limits—both upon our reasons for fighting and on how we fight.

The Dual Temptations of American Power

Rightly understood, the limits of just war exist to make war a thinkable and human undertaking, to remind us that *techne* must be controlled by human moral purpose. And, ironically, we are most likely to exercise such moral control if we do not suppose that we can easily master or possess the technical capacities that are our own invention. "War first became total in the minds of men," Paul Ramsey once wrote. He meant that total war—being possessed by force in a way that makes us blind momentum—is not the result of technology. It is the result of supposing—always falsely—that everything is within our power.

We stand at a time when many particular questions—the meaning of just cause, the nature of permissible preemption, the responsibilities of nation states, the limits and possibilities of humanitarian intervention, the meaning of "precision" weapons—are being rethought, often to very good ends. Precisely that is the work of just war theory, which is never simply static. But we sometimes imagine that its purpose is chiefly to help us identify—after the fact—guilty parties. No doubt it may sometimes help with that task, but more important is the framework it provides as we try to think in advance about the dangers and temp-

tations we may face. We are tempted, on the one hand, to suppose that *techne* creates its own moral world, and that we must conform to it or opt out of global responsibilities. We are tempted, on the other hand, to be enslaved by the world of force, supposing that everything is within our power. How we find our way through these dual temptations will determine, in large measure, the character of American empire.

Undoubtedly, technical advance sometimes helps to limit, rather than enlarge, the destruction of war. Ever more precise weapons, missile defenses (were they to become available), even, conceivably some day, tactical nuclear weapons truly usable for limited military purposes—these are not the danger, and some or all of them may be desirable. Returning to sword and shield alone would not deliver us from the world of force, as even the most casual reader of Weil's essay should realize. For in any world it is possible to scorn the enemy, to miss the sense of equity that sets limits on how we pursue our aims. The fundamental problem is never the sword, but the hand that wields it—not the weapons, but the frail human spirit, so easily overcome by *furor* rather than guided by *pietas*.

Recent discussions of the morality of war—especially Roman Catholic discussions—have fostered the notion that just war thinking requires a "presumption against war." This is not, I think, a very helpful way of putting the matter, though it is trying to get at something important. A simple presumption against war would sometimes mean an unwillingness to seek justice—and a willingness to permit force to rule. It would decline to compel tyrants to hesitate before the human countenance of those whom they oppress, torture, and kill. What we need is not a presumption against war but the humility that prays for grace to be freed from the enslaving power of force—a power that would make things of us all, even and especially in fleeting moments of triumph. For, as Weil writes, a man "cannot experience force without being touched by it to the very soul. Grace can prevent this touch from corrupting him, but it cannot spare him the wound." Only as we are prepared to ask for such grace should we be trusted to place our *techne* in service of force.