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'HAVE THE HIGHEST RIGHTEOUS FENCER IN YOUR MIND'S EYE' MIEVEAL MARTIAL ETHIC AS A CONCEPTUAL REPOSITORY FOR JUST WAR THEORY

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ABSTRACT

In many cultures, war has been seen as something best avoided but also inevitable. Hence, legitimate reasons for waging war have been sought and conceptualised in different cultural contexts. According to current scholarly wisdom, all such conceptualisations are socially constructed and draw from cultural resources available in a given time and place. A question which has so far received little to no attention, however, is the role of violence experienced on the personal level in shaping these conceptualisations.

This question is applied to the Late Middle Ages and a unique German martial arts treatise, called the 'Nuremberg Codex' [HS 3227a]. A qualitative content analysis of this manuscript reveals an interplay between pragmatic observations obtained through martial practice and axiological frameworks. Through discussing the broader historical-cultural context of martial arts in late-medieval and early-modern Germany as well as the late medieval just war theory, three conclusions are proposed: first, restraint in combat was seen as both a pragmatic and an ethical necessity; second, moral conduct was an integral part of martial technique; and third, axiology found specific somatic manifestations.

INTRODUCTION

The question of how to tame humans' proclivity for violence is a very old problem, possibly even one of the original problems faced by any culture [Campione 2007; Van Vugt 2012]. Diverse philosophies, mythologies, and taboos are introduced in order to present human life as precious and killing as wrong. These, however, must be reconciled with sociocultural reality, which has never been free from violence [Campbell 1999]. There has always been a need for what is now called 'just war theory', a concept named after, and developed from, its medieval predecessor, known as *bellum iustum*.

In the literature on the history of international law and military theory, *bellum iustum* has been considered mostly in its relation to Antiquity [e.g., Hoben 1983], medieval crusades and legal systems [e.g., Campione 2007], its modern reworkings [Benziger 2006], and contemporary reception [Kolb 1997; Simon 2018]. Discourse around it has revolved around questions pertaining to Christian ethics, religious dogmata, and power structures within the Latin world (especially as elucidated by Augustine and Thomas Aquinas), as well as to the notion of the natural law whose development happened largely due to the debates about just wars. Its political entanglement in the medieval and post-medieval periods has also been scrutinised, especially in the context of the dynamics of Spanish conquests of the Americas or Germany's eastward expansion in the Slavic and Baltic territories and the increasingly sophisticated resistance strategies employed by these lands' native elites [Ehrlich 1955; Bishko 1975; Tamm 2013; Johnson 2014].

Just war theory's philosophical roots and framings, as well as its politically charged and ethically questionable applications, are well known. However, these observations refer to the macroscale decisions taken by temporal or spiritual rulers and enacted at the community or strategic levels. At the same time, the question of these concepts' relevance for, and circulation at the grass roots level – namely choices made by individual combatants in violent encounters on and off the battlefield – is left virtually unaddressed.

This omission is all the more puzzling if we consider that much of medieval warfare consisted of confrontations between individuals rather than masses [Mondschein 2015]. Moreover, interpersonal violence was endemic throughout the Middle Ages and well into the early-modern period and had its own unwritten ethic combining Christian spirituality, pre-Christian martially-flavoured notions of honour and masculinity, and common sense [Tlusty 2011]. If these grass roots cultural encapsulations of bloodshed had remained entirely detached from their higher-order renderings, it would be quite surprising.

Small wonder then that scholars have found traces of just war theory in medieval didactic literature directed at young knights – future leaders and combatants [Johnson 2014]. The question remains, however, whether this was only a top-down process – from learned jurists and theologians, usually recruited from the clergy, to lay poets and knights of the order of the *bellatores*. What if we hypothesise that the flow of ideas also had an opposite, bottom up direction? Was it that just war theory was imposed on everyday martial praxis or the other way round, with experiences and conventions of interpersonal violence informing the theory of war on a grander scale?

METHODS

In order to address this question, this article proceeds in three sections. First, it presents the defining features of the late medieval just war theory as reconstructed from the existing literature. It will not trace the whole historical development of this concept as that would move beyond the scope of our current discussion. Next, to avoid vague generalisations and ground its observations in the actual statements made by medieval people, it focuses on a case study rooted in a particular period (the turn of the 14th/15th century), a particular place (Southern Germany), and a particular text (the martial arts treatise from the Nuremberg manuscript Hs3227a). The article's second section introduces the chosen manuscript and examines its content as it relates to the research question. Finally, it proposes conclusions based on my theory-driven reading of the source. In order to explore its conceptual structure, I used the Qualitative Text Analysis method assisted with the MAXQDA software for qualitative coding visualisation [Kuckartz 2014].¹ Apart from looking for text fragments corresponding to the elements of the just war theory identified in the previous literature, I investigated the entire work and coded other topics discussed in it. This way I hoped to be able to reveal not only the explicit, but also the implicit interrelations between ethical and practical aspects of personal combat as presented in the investigated source.

1 Qualitative coding is a research procedure used for methodical analysis of non-quantifiable data, such as historical narratives. While an investigated text is read through several times, its particular fragments (chapters, paragraphs, sentences, etc.) are marked with 'codes', i.e. short captions highlighting relevant aspects of the data material. Hence, as put by Kathy Charmaz, qualitative codes act as 'the pivotal link between collecting data and developing an emergent theory to explain these data. Through coding you define what is happening in the data and begin to grapple with what it means' [Kuckartz 2014: 23].

INTRODUCTION TO JUST WAR THEORY

As already mentioned, the historical notions of just war theory – i.e., conceptualisations of circumstances in which it would be ethical to resort to violence or even kill other human beings – have already been considered in numerous studies. There is no place here to discuss even the major works, much less all of them, so instead I will quote two important and relatively new contributions which not only engage and reference the older literature, but also provide fresh and useful perspectives on the subject.

James Turner Johnson, in the latest edition of his classic work [Johnson 2014], argues that although the roots of the Western just war theory can be traced to pre-Christian times, it was not given definite and sophisticated legal, ethical, and theological framing until debated by Christian theologians, starting from Augustine through Gratian to Thomas Aquinas [Johnson 2014: xxii-xxv]. He also carefully distinguishes between two major pillars of the just war theory: the right reasons to wage war (*ius ad bellum*) and the right ways to wage war (*ius in bello*).

In its mature form, *ius ad bellum* would usually include:

- just cause, *causa iusta* (ethically justified reason to wage war);
- right authority, *auctoris principis* (war declared by an anointed ruler and not opposed by their people);
- right intention, *intention recta* (war waged with an honest will to stick to its just cause);
- proportionality (waging war has to bring less harm than restraining from violence);
- violence as the last resort (war only when other attempts at peace-making failed);
- war meant to achieve peace (war's only goal is to restore peace). [Johnson 2014: xxii]

As such, *ius ad bellum* contained purely ethical conditions, informed by their authors' Christian faith and theological formation. On the other hand, *ius in bello* concentrated on more practical aspects of war:

- discrimination/distinction (who and to what extent should be excluded from wars);

- proportionality (how to adjust the use of military means to a given situation in order to minimise harm). [Johnson 2014: xxiii]

Unlike the moral criteria listed in *ius ad bellum*, those required for a war to remain 'just' once it started required good practical knowledge of warfare. Let us mark this observation, as it will become significant later.

In another work, Marek Tamm [2013] offers a study of how the just war theory and the idea of the crusades were reinterpreted and contorted since the 12th century to justify the expansion of the Teutonic Order, as well as German and Polish principalities, towards the northern and eastern pagan territories, such as those of the Polabian Slavs or Baltic Prussians. Tamm notes that the 'ordinary' crusades were easy to present as just wars – they clearly had a defensive cause (defending the Holy Land from the pagans) and right intention (reconquest, glory of God, and salvation), were declared by anointed authorities (Pope and Emperor), followed diplomatic attempts at persuading pagans to return Jerusalem, and aimed to ensure peaceful pilgrimage and worship for Christians. The so-called 'Baltic' or 'Northern Crusades', on the other hand, presented a much greater challenge in that regard. The pagan lands had neither any Christian historical sites nor relics to defend or reclaim, and no Christian population to protect. Therefore, just reasons for invading and conquering these lands could come only from two situations:

- a pre-emptive attack aimed at stopping future pagan raids into the Christian territories;
- as a means to protect peaceful missionaries and new converts living in the pagan territory.

As convincingly shown by Tamm, both ideas were skilfully juggled by late-medieval political leaders in Italy and Germany to garner popular support for military expeditions into the Slavic and Baltic lands. On the other hand, such raids were also met not only with military resistance, but also theoretical resistance – i.e., legal and theological. For instance, the practice of framing the Teutonic Order's expansion as a crusade and thus as a just war in the 15th century was met with elaborate and seminal opposition by Polish academicians, most notably Stanisław of Skalbmierz and Paweł Włodkowic of Brudzeń, who argued for the right of pagans to have their own states and lands independent from the authority of the Papacy or the Empire, as well as their own religious beliefs [Ciosek 2009; Ożóg 2009].

This observation makes it clear that pre-emptive aggression against the pagans was not universally supported within Latin Christendom and stances towards it varied depending on socio-cultural and political contexts, such as the conflicting international agendas of the

Teutonic Order and Poland. However, as announced at the beginning, I would like to pay some more attention to the grassroots level of this phenomenon. Let us start by asking why was it so easy for ordinary German knights and men-at-arms to accept that a defensive war could include a pre-emptive offensive and even conquest of the enemy's territory? Is greed for land and loot really a sufficient explanation? Leaving it this way, as proposed by many modern historians [Niewiński 2019; Catlos 2014], would imply feeble significance of the metaphysical factors affecting fighting men's decision-making, such as the hope for achieving salvation for their pious lives and repentance from sins. This, in turn, would contradict the whole body of research arguing for the contrary, based on evidence from other areas of medieval life [Hirsch 1996].

One could of course argue that knights, and especially the young or impoverished ones, were interested in the northern crusades, because they offered an opportunity to win honour (*êre* or *tugend* in medieval German), which was a crucial asset in upward social mobility [Jones 1959; Gassmann 2015]. However, this could be objected to on other grounds. For instance, as shown by Barbara Ann Tlusty [2011], in her extensive review of the period's judicial and administrative documents, in order to maintain or gain honour through combat, early-modern German men had to follow an unwritten 'martial ethic'.² This ethic would involve:

- seeking mediation or other peaceful means to resolve the conflict;
- fighting only in defence of life, honour or repute;
- warning before resorting to violence, sometimes trying to deter the adversary by a harmless display of martial prowess;
- ensuring equality in numbers and weapons;
- employing proper fighting technique, such as not using thrusts with the sword or by hitting with the flat of the blade, especially against fellow countrymen;
- abstaining from using magic or charms [Tlusty 2011: 96–102].

All the above rules show significant overlap with the just war criteria, with the first three resembling some of the *ius ad bellum* components, and with the final three smoothly fitting the *ius in bello*.

² For the sake of clarity, Tlusty's work is centred on the early modern period, but she convincingly shows that this martial culture was firmly rooted in medieval traditions.

Interestingly, these unwritten rules, solidified as tradition and actively practised, were often at odds with official legal regulations formulated under the influence of the leading moralists of the time who, as a rule, were adamantly opposed to the very idea of 'setting the record straight' through combat. Even more importantly, though, as late as in the 16th century, a German noble or burgher who fought for honour against the law but followed all the rules of the 'martial ethic' could still reliably count on leniency from the judges, who by definition were themselves men of honour socialised into the martial culture [Tlusty 2011: 96]. This observation would suggest that experiences of personal combat – conducted in person or even just spectated – may have influenced the reception of the just war theory outside the academic and clerical circles, or perhaps even informed the theory itself. In order to explore this hypothesis further, I decided to examine the conceptualisation of martial arts, in regard to both their praxis and axiology, as preserved in one of the so-called 'fight books', or *Fechtbücher* in German – that is, written manuals discussing such arts as sword-fighting or wrestling [Forgeng 2012].

RESULTS

The fight book in question is a part of a larger codex, known under its inventory number Hs3227a, or various other names, such as the 'Nuremberg Codex', 'Codex Pol' or, erroneously, 'Döbringer Codex' [Żabiński 2008; Burkart 2016; Vodička 2019]. It is currently held in Nuremberg but probably originated somewhere in Southern Germany. Its dating is disputed, but can be reasonably approximated to 'around 1389' [Burkart 2016: 453]. There is no room here to provide a detailed overview of this source, but it is important to note that the martial arts teachings contained therein are quite unusual, since unlike other similar works from the period, they offer a wealth of remarks not only on the kinaesthetic, but also philosophical, ethical, and tactical/strategic aspects of armed combat. Moreover, it is often considered the earliest witness to a larger corpus of similar writings, all of which are connected by the fact that they quote certain 'Grandmaster Liechtenauer' and his martial teachings as their source of lore and legitimacy. Finally, this manuscript is believed to have involved the work of a martial art practitioner who at the same time had originated from, or been influenced by, the scholastic tradition [Acutt 2016; Burkart 2016]. As such it seems the perfect vantage point for tracing any potential crossover between pragmatic martial lore and academic just war theory.³

³ For a different perspective and dating, see Vodička [2019].

QUALITATIVE TEXTUAL ANALYSIS ⁴

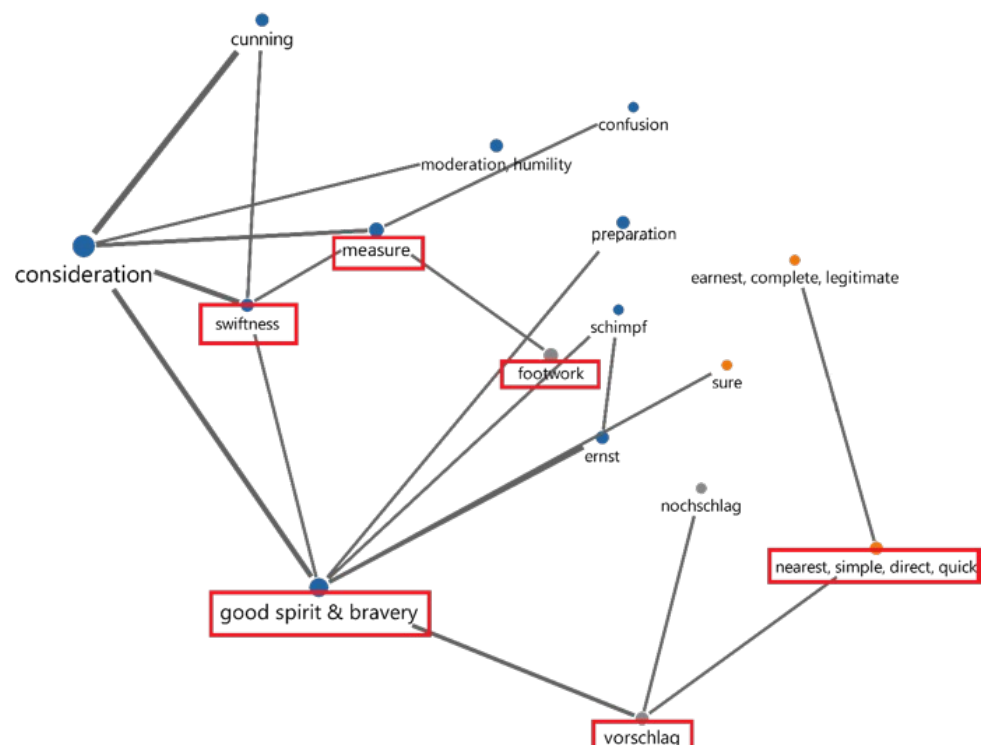
A qualitative textual analysis performed on this book immediately revealed certain interrelations between its discussion of martial practices and martial values. By employing these methods, it was even possible to establish such connections in cases where they were not made explicit by the author himself.

A theory-driven reading of the fight book found no direct references to medieval just war theory, but yielded several fragments which can be convincingly classified as matching some defining components of it – namely *causa iusta* and *intentio recta*. Table 1 (opposite) shows these fragments (first two columns). It also includes passages (third column) which illustrate the leading strategic idea of the book – that the only sure defence can be achieved by a pre-emptive attack. The latter quotations will become important later in the discussion.

Another interesting finding was an apparent contradiction between the aforementioned oft-expressed need for an offensive fighting attitude – swiftness, bravery, and proactivity in seeking the first strike (*Vorschlag*)

4 The term 'qualitative' here is used to distinguish the employed text analysis method from quantitative approaches. In particular, it is to emphasise that I did not focus on determining word counts for relevant terms used in the investigated source, or their collocations, and performing statistical analyses. Instead, I worked with the whole text following the hermeneutical principle. For more on the distinction between qualitative and quantitative text analysis methods, see Kuckartz [2014: 1–13].

Figure 1:
Map of the density of interactions between qualitative codes referring to martial praxis and axiology identified in the fight book from the manuscript Hs3227a. Codes crucial for the present paper are marked with red boxes. The grey lines link codes which collocate in the same fragments of the source, with the thickness of the line proportional to the frequency of collocations. Only links with >2 collocations were marked. Note that in the majority of cases, the code 'measure' corresponded to the word *moße* in the original text of the source. Compiled by the author using the MaxMap function in MAXQDA.



– and the measure, self-control, and consideration in combat advocated by the author of the fight book.

However, as illustrated by the conceptual map below (Fig. 1), consideration and self-control (*klugheit*) are seen by him as connected to measure (*moße*), which in turn is understood as a quality ensuring fencers' proper choice of strength, speed, or distance for given combat situations. Measure in this text is also tightly connected to footwork (*schrete* or *treten*) and through swiftness (*rischeit*) and consideration – to good spirit and bravery (*gute mute* and *kunheit*). This way, although not explicitly, the author of the manuscript demonstrates how swift and audacious offensive fighting style (*Vorschlag*) is rooted in careful consideration, foresight, cunning, and well-managed footwork – a paradox well known also in modern sport fencing literature [Szabó 1997; Czajkowski 2005].

This remark seems worth making, because it so happens that the concept of measure (*moße*) was also central to German didactic literature throughout the whole medieval period. Traditionally, this has been connected to the influence of Christian axiology and classical philosophical traditions and thus interpreted as a theme repeated in chivalric or martial texts after clerical moralists [Kellet 2016: 76–82]. However, if we consider that the importance of measure, understood as an ability to act deliberately and precisely, is also highlighted in our contemporary and strictly pragmatic texts, such as the quoted influential sport fencing manuals by Zbigniew Czajkowski [2005] or Láslo Szabó [1997], it becomes necessary to ask whether the flow of ideas may have had an opposite direction.

Intentio recta and discrimination/distinction	Causa iusta	Preemptive attack
<p>'In all fencing requisite is: the help of god of righteousness' [Hs3227a, fol. 17r]</p>	<p>'If this happens and no man attacks for no reason / If you wish to succeed In all fencing, I advise / really do not rely too much upon your art. And have the highest righteous fencer [i.e. God – MT] / in your mind's eye, so that he may protect you in your art. And practise your art for emergencies / in the right way. And not for nothing or out of foolishness, / so you may succeed always / because a fencer / is a good and righteous man.' [Hs3227a, fol. 44r]</p>	<p>'When he / Begins to fence with / So he drives-in [i.e. attacks – MT] with correctness / continually and decisively / bravely one [strike] after the other. / Stay in a rush / Without intervals, immediate. / So that the opponent cannot come / to strikes. / (...) I say to you truthfully, the opponent does not defend themselves without danger. If you have understood this, he cannot come to strikes.' [Hs3227a, fol. 17v]</p>
<p>'I will give you the third advice / you should not learn fencing to overpower someone with your art / for unjust reasons furthermore you should not / fence with a pious man / except there is real need.' [Hs3227a, fols. 43v-44r]</p>	<p>'And also it happens often that a man has to stand for his honor, body and goods. If he is then victorious with his art in a knightly manner and with God and rightfully I praise.' [Hs3227a, fol. 44r]</p>	<p>'Gloss, etc. Here he [i.e. Master Liechtenauer – MT] names the four positions or four guards. About them, little is to be held. Instead, in any confrontation, a person shall absolutely not lay too long therein. For Liechtenauer has a particular proverb: Whoever lays there, they are dead. Whoever rouses themselves, they yet live. And that pertains to the positions that a person shall preferably rouse themselves with applications. Because he that idles [in] the guards, he might preclude the moment of truth with that.' [Hs3227a, fol. 32r]</p>
<p>'Fencing has been invented / to be seriously practised And in good real grace / because it brings agility wits and smartness.' [Hs3227a, fol. 44r]</p>		

Table 1:
Fragments of the fight book from the manuscript Hs3227a which correspond to elements of the medieval just war theory.
Compiled by the author.

DISCUSSION

NAVIGATING THE AXIOLOGICAL-PRACTICAL NEXUS OF LATE-MEDIEVAL MARTIAL CULTURE

Ethics as martial technique

Meticulous analyses of moralist writings of the period, such as that by Kirsten Fenton [2007], often challenge more traditional views on chivalric concepts of masculinity, which tend to accentuate ferocity and brutality as its driving tenets, at least regarding chivalry's martial aspects and relations between men. In contrast, Fenton argues for a more complex interplay between the harsh reality of martial formation and the need for restraint and self-control as factors influencing knightly ideas of manhood and proper conduct [Fenton 2007: 760–769]. Similar conclusions were proposed in another work by Tlusty [2016] which traced analogous notions unfolding within early-modern urban martial circles. To illustrate, she quotes several instances of burghers involved in fatal cases and facing lenient treatment at court, because they managed to adhere to proper 'martial ethic' and restrained themselves from certain prohibited combat methods. Such was the case, for instance, of certain furrier (*kürschner*), Samuel Probst, who accidentally killed his opponent during an urban fencing contest (*fechtschule*) but was absolved by judges when the fencing masters in charge of the event testified that he fought with restraint and struck the victim with the flat of the sword,⁵ according to the custom [Tlusty 2016: 563].⁶ This suggests that the martial lore informed by actual experiences of interpersonal combat may have indeed shaped or at least influenced the medieval didactic and moralist discourse.

This idea may be corroborated, if we notice that the author of the discussed fight book apparently understood that martial prowess alone did not guarantee success in combat – needed was also a certain amount of God's favour, or luck as we would nowadays call it:

5 Striking with the flat of the sword is not discussed in the known German fight books before the 16th century but appears later, which can be considered as an indication of the influence of the *fechtschulen* on the general martial discourse and praxis of the time [Farrell 2015: 222, 228].

6 Another account could be quoted here since it witnesses an application of this kind of martial ethic in a legal context already in the 15th century – in the year 1444. At the time, a fencing master named Conrad von Siebenbürgen was challenged by another unnamed master in Rothenburg. In the course of the fight, Master Conrad swung his sword in such a way that he missed the head and wounded his opponent's hand. This was proclaimed 'dishonourable' (*unredlich*) and resulted in Conrad's brief imprisonment, despite his 'victory' [Schubert 1995: 241; for a digest in English, see Kleinau 2012].

Whatever he wishes [to do against] someone just as if he would say: 'This I mean to truly conduct' and so this shall and must go forward with the help of God, so it might fail him in nothing. He does what he should when he bravely hurries and charges there with the fore-strike [*Vorschlag* – MT], as one will often hear hereafter.
[Hs3227a, fol. 16v]

Lack of this determination and divine support, as the author observes, 'often results in a peasant slaying a master, because he is brave and won the fore-strike [*Vorschlag* – MT] according to this precept' [Hs3227a, fol. 20v]. And winning God's favour required one to fight a good fight, which brings us back to the notion of just and unjust wars. This suggests that, at least for the author of the investigated fight book, ethical conduct was a substantial part of martial practices, because it had direct influence on the outcome of any potential violent encounter. By writing that 'practice is fully sufficient without art, but art is not fully sufficient without practice' [Hs3227a, fol. 15r] he emphasised that martial skill and theory needed regular training to be efficiently used, but his remarks about the 'help of God' and the 'peasant slaying a master' make it clear that no skill, physical preparation, or weaponry will ensure victory, if the Providence is against the fighter. This may lead to a conclusion that what the fight book in Hs3227a actually describes is ethics as an integral part of martial technique.

Surprising as it may seem at first, the above inference is in fact quite in line with the logic of a medieval mindset. Due to the limited scope of this paper, let it suffice to quote the custom of judicial duels or *duellum*, a form of argumentation in a court trial known from the earliest Germanic laws and still included in German legal regulations in the Late Middle Ages [Lampart 2013]. It was a sanctioned duel, preceded with both parties taking oaths of innocence, in which a particularly serious case would be decided by combat. The reasoning behind this solution was that God would not allow an oath-breaker to prevail and so the winner was to be considered innocent. Regardless of the actual prevalence of such practices [Elema 2019], their common inclusion both in period legal documents and martial writings, such as those of Master Hans Talhoffer [Lampart 2013: 73] leaves no doubt about their vivid presence in medieval German *imaginarium*. Hence, they may serve as an extreme example of the ethical being tightly interwoven into the martial.

Expression of restraint in interpersonal combat

Apart from the above, two more things seem worth noting while reading the fight book from a just war theoretical perspective. First, the lack of any reference to the right authority (*auctoris principis*) – the same aspect also differed between the just war theory and the unwritten

'martial ethic' described by Tlusty. Unlike the former, the latter lacked any official 'governing body', 'authorities', or written canons, but instead was largely formed as a bottom-up social process influenced by different cultural pressures and embodied in practices, not documents. This would suggest that the teachings preserved in the 'Nuremberg Codex' were closer to the actual grassroots martial praxis of the day than to the academic theories of combat. Second, the preference for attacking as a means of defence, so prominently expressed in the source, remained a characteristic feature of many German sword-fighting traditions at least until the end of the 16th century and perhaps even well into the 21st century – with the latter period represented by the practice of *Pauken* or *Mensur*, i.e. formalised form of duelling with sharp weapons still taking place at some German universities in which technical and tactical focus is placed almost exclusively on offensive cuts.⁷ Such a long life of certain themes already present in the discussed source, as well as in the broader 'martial ethic' in which it was presumably immersed, may be evidenced by 19th-century accounts on German fencing coming from the Germans and foreigners alike. In this regard, a telling account comes from *Ökonomische Encyclopädie*, a voluminous German encyclopaedia compiled between 1777 and 1858, and more precisely from its entry for *Stoßfechten* ('thrust-fencing'):

Meanwhile, fencing with the thrust [*Stoß*] in military academies and institutes [...] is still regarded as the fundamental school of fencing, resembling the role of *minuet* in dancing, and for this reason it used to be taught by the best fencing masters. At German universities, they practise thrusting, or fence with the thrusts, only in Jena, Erlangen, and Würzburg, but even in the last of these universities this manner of swordplay has already been partially replaced by cut-fencing [*Hiebfechten*], because thrusts [*Stoßen*] are considered unmanly [*unmännlich*], whereas cuts [*Schlagen*] are knightly [*ritterlich*].
[Krünitz et al. 1840: 669]⁸

7 I am not aware of any comprehensive works on *Pauken* in English, but a good digest of German works can be found online here: <https://deacademic.com/dic.nsf/dewiki/943793> [accessed on 14 Dec 2020].

8 Translated roughly by me from the German original: *Indeßen ist das Fechten auf den Stoß in den Militär-Akademien und Instituten, wie schon oben erwähnt worden, immer noch als die Grundschule im Fechten, wie die Menuett im Tanzen, betrachtet, und deshalb auch von den bestallten Fechtmeistern gelehrt worden. Auf den Hochschulen in Deutschland wird nur noch in Jena, Erlangen und Würzburg gestoßen, oder auf den Stoß gefochten, aber auch auf der letzten Universität ist es schon theilweise durch das Schlagen oder Hiebfechten verdrängt worden, indem man das Stoßen für unmännlich, und das Schlagen für ritterlich hält.*

Very similar observations were published in *Historia i psychologia szermierki* (English: 'History and Psychology of Fencing') by a late 19th-century Polish scholar from Lwów (Lviv), Aleksander Raciborski. When describing the state of fencing in his century and comparing Italian, French, and German schools of swordplay, he noted the following:

The thrust finds no use there [in Germany – MT], neither in duels nor *assaut* [practice bouts], albeit some *maitres* [fencing masters] mention it briefly; therefore, their play tends to be heavy and broad, with strong cuts delivered in a curved manner, their attacks can be very firm and deep, often even vivid and swift ripostes, but their game is mechanical, they cannot guard themselves from simultaneous hits (*coups fourées*)⁹ nor parry thrusts, and they try to explain to everybody that the thrust is not as important or dangerous as it would seem. [Raciborski 1894: 29]¹⁰

Similar accounts could be found in numerous other places. When we add to this that at least since the late Middle Ages, and likely throughout the entire history of Germany, fencing held a prominent place among exercises (*übungen*) meant to develop physical fitness [Schultz 1903: 373], in the 19th century jointly labelled as gymnastics (*Turnen*), it becomes clear that the ideas about martial ethic as something unique to the German nation and based upon restraint from certain 'dishonourable' practices was by all probability not just a vague cultural code or purely literary *topos* inherited from the chivalric past, but something embodied in popular ludic practices and transmitted directly, from one generation of practitioners to another. It seems all the more interesting, therefore, that what the Germans saw as a form of restraint and noble self-control could be criticised as recklessness by others, such as Raciborski, who faulted the German fencers with excessive focus on offensive manoeuvres and negligence of their own defence. This may bring us back in time, to German knights eagerly accepting preemptive

9 Raciborski explains elsewhere that *coup fourée* means a situation in which both adversaries hit each other at roughly the same time, regardless of how it happened, and considers it a damnable practice to be avoided by serious swordsmen.

10 Translated by me from the Polish original: *Pchnięcia, w pojedynku mianowicie i w assaut, wcale tam nie używają, jakkolwiek niektórzy metrowie w zasadzie coś o niem wspominają; ztąd bywa ich gra zazwyczaj ciężką i szeroką, silne cięcia dają w łukach, ataki miewają bardzo stanowcze i głębokie, często nawet energiczne i szybkie riposty, ale gra ich jest mechaniczna, unikać cięć równoczesnych (*coups fourées*) parować pchnięć nie umieją, usiłują też wytłumaczyć każdemu, że pchnięcie nie jest tak ważne i groźne, jakby się zdawało.*

missionary expeditions against pagan Slavs, Prussians, or Livonians as defensive, just wars. It also renders the 'Nuremberg Codex' even more worth re-reading from a somatic-ethical perspective, since it clearly advocates the use of thrusting and, therefore, sheds light on an earlier stage of development of German martial traditions when thrust lacked the negative connotations known from later periods¹¹. Hence, unlike in the 16th century when fighters showed proper restraint by avoiding the use of the point of the sword, the 'measure' (*moße*) and 'consideration' (*klugheit*) described in Hs3227a seem to have had a different kinaesthetic manifestation.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the investigated fight book provides a window into late-medieval conceptualisations of martial arts in their ethical dimensions. By doing so, it reveals how this axiology was rooted in down-to-earth, pragmatic realities of combat – the centrality of measure (*moße*) in the martial arts system of master Liechtenauer does not have to be seen as a trope borrowed from period didactic literature or academic discourse, but may well be a practical principle distilled from actual martial practice. Similarly, the same experiences may have served as an epistemic residue which provided a foundation for the development of the just war theory. This seems all the more probable, when we consider that as a rule medieval thinkers – philosophers, jurists, and other clergymen – were socialised into the 'culture of the sword' [Tlusty 2011] and possessed at least basic practical martial formation. So much so that there are confirmed historical instances of fencing masters belonging to the medieval *oratores* [Cinato 2016]. (In that respect, quoting Plato's wrestling background as a famous example, clear continuity can be traced from Antiquity well into the modern period.)

Hence, re-reading the medieval and early-modern fight books from a perspective focused on their somatic and axiological aspects promises important insights into the often neglected 'bottom-up' flow of ideas – from violent, martial experiences of individuals to socially constructed ethical and didactic conceptualisations. Such approach used in the case study presented here suggested the following hypotheses:

1. The importance of restraint and self-control in combat is not a theme projected upon martial teachings by their author's internalised moralist and didactic discourses of the period, such as the academic just war theory, but rather a pragmatic prescription derived from first-hand experiences of combat (or a tradition of such).
2. Ethical conduct was seen as an integral part of martial training because fighters' morals would be pivotal for their efficiency in combat – without divine support even well-practised martial techniques were bound to fail.
3. Some of the ethical and spiritual underpinnings of medieval and early-modern European martial arts had specific and tangible somatic manifestations, as exemplified by the changing attitude of German fencers towards the use of thrusting in swordplay.

Obviously, however, due to the preliminary character of this study, additional research would be needed to substantiate these hypotheses further. In particular, a broad-based comparative study of the German corpus of fight books would help verify the validity of presented conclusions in regard to this cultural circle; on the other hand, inclusion of foreign martial writings, perhaps also non-European ones, might offer an avenue for tracing major patterns in how axiologies and somatics shaped each other and were expressed in the realm of martial arts.

Conflict of interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Source

Hs3227a, Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nürnberg

digital copy available online: <http://dlib.gnm.de/item/Hs3227a/html> (accessed on 22 May 2022); transcription by Hagedorn D and modern English translation by Trosclair C, available online: [https://wiktenauer.com/wiki/Pol_Hausbuch_\(MS_3227a\)](https://wiktenauer.com/wiki/Pol_Hausbuch_(MS_3227a)) (accessed on 22 May 2022).

11 It seems worth noting that at least some of the 16th century German martial practitioners, such as Master Joachim Meyer, were aware of the fact that thrusting used to be seen in a positive light by their ancestors [Adamson 2011].

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