

'Drone Vision': Precision Ethics Theory and the Royal Air Force's use of Drones

Written by James Greenhalgh

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JAMES GREENHALGH, NOV 9 2020

The use of unmanned aerial vehicles, otherwise known as UAVs or drones, has been the cause of huge global criticism as technological security heads into a new decade. Western powers, including Britain have come to favour drones in combat situations in order to minimise the risk of both soldier casualties and collateral damage on the ground. According to defense secretary Gavin Williamson, the government intends to invest £7 million on a brand-new drone squadron after leaving the European Union in order to strengthen its global presence and enhance our lethality^[1]. But to what extent do these 'lethal' drones contribute to a more precise and more ethical type of warfare? We often regard the use of drones as part of the natural progression in the technological modernisation of warfare. Thus, so long as they have the 'intention' of destroying IS militants, the general public consensus of drones used by the military is quite passive. During this essay, precision ethics theory will be used to help discuss various cases in which the Royal Air Force (RAF) has deployed drones, focusing mainly on Iraq and Syria. In particular Reyaad Khan, a British national IS militant who was organising a terrorist attack on Britain.

Firstly, this essay will give a short analysis of those in favour of drone warfare. The argument being that any positives of drone warfare are usually short lived. Secondly it will look at what is meant by 'ethical warfare' and use normative, precision and the newly founded 'necroethics' to define it. It sees drone warfare not as combat, but as an action of certainty, resulting in the impending death of your target and potentially other civilians. Thirdly it argues that the psychology of distance, language and 'drone vision' impacts the operator's moral ability to act as a human when dealing with the enemy. The essay will then compare the use of drones between the RAF and the American Air Force. This comes after fears of Britain following a similar narrative to the US by inputting huge investment into the weapons.

There is an argument to suggest that the use of UAV Predator Drones make the attack on a foreign enemy more precise and therefore a positive move for how war should be fought in the future. Some scholars studying drone strikes say that it is a moral obligation of the West to use drone strikes, due to their apparent safety and accuracy. Historian Strausser claims "there's no downside. Both ethically and normatively, there's a tremendous value. You're not risking the pilot. The pilot is safe. And all the empirical evidence shows that drones tend to be more accurate"^[2]. Advocates of drone strikes will often compare the UAVs to alternative modern weapons to make their point. For example airstrikes conducted by the RAF's new F-35 Lightning II jets carry more missiles with a larger blast radius and therefore create greater collateral damage. Proponents also note that in the reality of warfare there will always be some collateral damage. It is simply the unfortunate burden of living in a combat zone. Theorist Zehfus opens her article with the statement:

War necessarily involves destruction. Buildings are blown up, essential infrastructure is destroyed, lives are ended. Some of this damage is very much intended: the destruction of a designated target is, after all, a success in military terms^[3].

The unfortunate reality is that these 'positives' are usually short lived and can escalate further problems. The most recent attack of international interest was the drone strike on Iranian General Qasem Soleimani in Baghdad on 3rd January 2020. While this was an American attack conducted by the Trump administration, it helps highlight a recent

'Drone Vision': Precision Ethics Theory and the Royal Air Force's use of Drones

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and significant example, showing the need to discuss the global consequences of drone strikes. Democrat David Price spoke after the incident in Congress saying: "we have no illusions as to ... the atrocities perpetrated by Qasem Soleimani. However President Trump's ordering of Soleimani's assassination is an escalation that threatens the lives of thousands of Americans, including our servicemen" ^[4].

Predator drones have changed the entire complexion of the precision-ethics debate on modern warfare. The definition of precision from which this essay draws its arguments upon comes from the idea that "accuracy should be taken to mean the ability to strike the right target while minimising collateral damage. Precision targeting requires technological ability supported by good intelligence"^[5]. With this in mind, new warfare constitutes a different way of thinking in contrast to 20th Century combat or 'normative combat theory'. Meaning technology has removed the need to physically face your enemy. However, to argue that these types of unmanned weapons are more 'ethical' is difficult. This is because what one person defines as 'ethical', another will disagree.

French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas' ethics theory helps in defining what constitutes the moral code during combat. For Levinas, ethics has to be reinterpreted and understood as a primary philosophy, rather than merely an extension from ontological, epistemological or political narratives. Hence this essay is putting precision ethics theory at the forefront of criticising drone use in the Middle East. His theory "refers to the fact that 'I' cannot refuse responsibility for the 'other'"^[6]. In short, the ethical source to which this essay criticises the use of drone strikes is based around the lack of 'face to face' contact aerial warfare encounters and the (insufficient) responsibility which follows. Therefore it is seemingly impossible to draw comparisons between drone wars and war during the 20th Century, such as Vietnam. Instead we have a case of two confused conflict genres, being traditional warfare vs drone warfare. In this instance drones can no longer be talked about as a combat ethic, more that it is the ethic of putting someone to their certain death. Theorist Chamayou argues that:

It transforms war from being possibly asymmetrical into a unilateral relationship of death-dealing in which the enemy is deprived of the very possibility of fighting back. It [drone warfare] surreptitiously slips out of the normative framework initially designed for armed conflicts^[7].

When defining ethics in relation to this type of modern warfare, this analysis coins the new term 'necroethics'. This theory allows you to look into the possible murderous functions of the state, in this case Britain, as it contests the idea of state orchestrated terrorism. Furthermore, it condemns the state for allowing the killings to remain unspoken within a reductive formulation of ethics. This applies to the case of Reyaad Khan who was killed along with two other ISIL associates on 21st August 2015 in the town of Raqqa in Syria. David Cameron argued that "we took this action because there was no alternative ... we had no way of preventing his planned attack on our country without taking direct action"^[8]. This successful airstrike has helped the argument which deemed drones to be the more ethical weapon of choice, thus making it increasingly acceptable to use it in the future. Unfortunately drone strikes of this nature are not always as successful, suggesting there will always be an expectation of some collateral damage. According to data from the 2013 International Technology Conference in Pakistan, in October 2008 18 militants and 87 civilians died as a result of drone strikes^[9]. The resulting casualties shows a huge flaw in the weapons use. Furthermore, the AGM-114 Hellfire missile fired by the predator drone on Khan has a 'kill zone' radius of 15 metres and an injury radius of over 20 metres^[10]. This 'collateral damage' often comes at the cost of human lives meaning there is a crucial difference between hitting your target and hitting 'only' the target. Theorist Pugliese points out "in what way may the Iraqi citizens killed by coalition forces and insurgents not be seen as collateral damage ... but as murder victims of an imperial war"^[11]. Arguing that the success of important strikes, leads to the justification of accidental killings of civilians.

The drone which undertook the strike on Reyaad Khan in 2015 was operated from a control centre at RAF Waddington in Lincolnshire. The traditional principle of warfare by which you can't kill unless you are prepared to die, or see without being seen, cannot be applied to drone warfare.^[12] The superior technological capabilities of the RAF cannot be matched by their opponents due to economic constraints. Therefore is it ethically right to attack your enemy without placing yourself within the theatre of conflict? Thus the concept of perception through distance is important. It has been shown that humans, in this case drone pilots, are more likely to act in a ruthless manner the further removed they are from the person they are inflicting pain upon. The psychology of difference and distance

'Drone Vision': Precision Ethics Theory and the Royal Air Force's use of Drones

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changes the perspective on another person, civilian or not. By only looking from above, drone pilots encounter what is referred to as 'drone vision'. This starts by achieving a state of power through gaining height from an aerial perspective with the intention of displaying dominance and a projection of force. It goes on to disrupt the relation of power between the pilot and the assailant, thus distorting the operators effectiveness in constituting, regulating and determining how to deal with the target^[13].

By doing this you also remove all of your vital senses as to what it means to be human. When looking from this perspective you see houses, vehicles and groups with shapes of bodies within them, rather than seeing the actual bodies themselves. An ex American drone operator revealed to the Guardian that:

You never knew who you were killing because you never actually see a face, you just have silhouettes and it's easy to have that detachment and lack of empathy for human life as it's easy to think of them as something else^[14].

Thus it appears that precision is designed more to fit the safety of the Western soldier, rather than to protect the life of the non-combatant. On the one hand this reduces the volume of bombs used in modern warfare and protects RAF pilots, but this has to be coupled with better intelligence. As no matter how precise a drone strike may be, it cannot cancel out the imprecision of poor intelligence. Historian Bishop shows that "drones as weapons platforms have removed the possibility of operator casualties altogether. Precision and lethality however, only have value if they are directed at the right targets"^[15].

The rhetoric of precision has been clearly laid out for the public to see. As a word it links to the advancement of military technology and creates the intention of asserting imperial ambition in order to create legitimacy. On the 23rd August 2018 the British Ministry of Defence documented that "a reaper patrolled over the Euphrates Valley in Syria. A building occupied by Daesh was identified and hit with a single hellfire missile"^[16]. There was nothing in this report to suggest that civilians had or had not been killed during the attack. However, it is the language used by the Ministry of Defence website which only provided a limited and censored vision of the use of drones. Theorist Vanges argues that "the visual equivalent of the rhetoric of precision becomes a form of abstract, sanitized imagery where all we see are stock images of drones hovering mid-air over unspecified territories"^[17]. This argument is in no way suggesting that the actions taken against IS militants in the Middle East is done with ease. Merely that there needs to be more openness about the number of civilian casualties caused by the use of drones.

Previous analysis on the ethical nature of drone strikes have usually turned towards America's military policy within the Middle East. Ever since the first drone strike, which came as a reaction to the 9/11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre in 2001, the US has faced mounting criticism for its use of UAVs, particularly in Pakistan. Even though the United States and Pakistan are not (under International Law) at war, the CIA have continued to use drone strikes in Pakistan since June 2004. Between 2001 and 2018 it is estimated that 23,300 civilians have been killed as a result of US military action in Waziristan (North West Pakistan), mostly coming from drone attacks^[18].

The sheer amount of drone strikes conducted by the Americans on Syrian, Iraqi, Iranian and Pakistani soil means there is more evidence, compared to the RAF, by which to criticise their actions. In 2013 and for the first time in American history, a family travelled to Washington to address Congress about one particular drone strike. The Rehman family who lived in north Waziristan addressed Congress about the death of a family member. Momina Bibi Rehman was picking vegetables in a field as a missile intended for a nearby house struck her directly in front of her grandchildren. A Washington newspaper commented at the time that "sixty-one percent of Americans support drone attacks ... but only five members of congress showed up to listen to the story of a family suffering the consequences of this method of warfare"^[19]. This case helped bring to life the receiving end of America's drone strikes. Her thirteen year old grandson Zubair Rehman commented that "I no longer love blue skies, in fact I now prefer grey skies. The drones don't fly when the skies are grey"^[20]. Thus drones have created a new fear of the unknown. We are now no longer fighting a war with a uniform and a combatant can no longer be ascertained by any distinctive conventional sign. This returns to the theory of 'drone vision'. A drone abolishes the condition of differentiation thus depriving the combatant of showing whether he or she is a hostile target. Theorist Boyle says that;

Many of the targets of drones do not wear uniforms and are part-time combatants, fighting at one moment but

'Drone Vision': Precision Ethics Theory and the Royal Air Force's use of Drones

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engaging in peaceful civilian activities at the next. The fact that many insurgent and terrorist groups do not have a clear command structure or distinction between political and military leaders produces a series of important moral dilemmas^[21].

There are fears that the RAF is following a similar narrative to the US. As seen by American case studies above, there is more evidence by which to launch an ethical debate on precision of US military drone strikes. In reaction to the air strike of Reyaad Khan a full parliamentary inquiry was launched into not only the ethical practices of strikes on non-combatants but on the legality of the strike. At the time Britain had only been approved by Parliament to conduct reconnaissance missions in Syria, not drone strikes. Drones have been in use in other parts of the Middle East such as Iraq, where up until Khan's death, over 250 drone strikes had been carried out against ISIL and Al Qaeda militants. However documents from the inquiry reveal that due to the 'precise' nature of this particular attack, the rules for engagement applied to the RAF as they would do in a traditional combat zone. It said "where the UK determines that it faces an imminent armed attack from ISIL, it is entitled to use necessary and proportionate force to repel or forestall that attack in exercise of the inherent right of individual self defence"^[22]. This shows the importance of an air strike actually being 'precise' and 'proportionate' to its target. When strikes start killing more citizens than militants, a full ethical inquiry on precision can be made. But was the extension of the right to kill Khan in a country the RAF was yet to declare war on, going beyond classical legal boundaries? The above document also suggested that:

The other occupants of the car travelling with Khan might have been legitimate targets ... they were after all travelling with a known ISIL attack planner. Even if they were not targets in their own right, they may nevertheless have been deemed acceptable collateral damage in relation to the expected military advantage^[23].

This part of the committee document sheds a different and more uncertain light into the deaths of two other 'suspected' militants travelling with Khan in the car. There appears to be a constant remodelling of how the document defines a 'legitimate' target. Those controlling the drones find themselves slipping from an epistemology of fact through observation to one of suspicion where targeting is based on a particular behaviour or pattern of life. Strikes conducted on such high priority targets are usually of quick response by the RAF and are based on two types of intelligence. One being focussed on a high valued target like Reyaad Khan, which is known as a 'personality strike'. The other is judged on patterns of behaviour, like the associates with Khan in the car. This is known as a 'signature strike'. The fear of your target escaping means that such decisions are made under huge pressure. Thus there is a difficulty to perform an adequate collateral damage estimate due to the short time restraints. Chamayou continues this by arguing "the fact that your weapon enables you to destroy more precisely whomever you wish, does not mean that you are capable of making out who is and who is not a legitimate target"^[24].

To conclude, proponents for the use of drone strikes in the Middle East have made the case that it is the moral obligation of the RAF to use their superior (precise) technological capabilities to attack ISIL militants at their source. However, the use of the term 'precise' has been used far too casually in the praising of drone strikes. As seen above this type of warfare does not completely rule out the possibility of civilians being killed as a result of using drone strikes. In actual fact there is an even greater lack of understanding from non-combatants that you might be in a war zone due to the hidden nature of drones. ISIL fighters not wearing a uniform means that they do not conform to the normative distinction of classical warfare. Necroethics and Levinas' ethics theory show that such comparisons to 'old wars' are futile as the economic and technological superiority of the RAF's drones, mean it is more a case of certain death than normal combat. In the case of Reyaad Khan, there is no question that action had to be taken to stop him from inflicting terror on home soil. The drone in this instance however hit other targets who 'might' have been IS militants. This leads us to ask questions around whether pilots encounter 'drone vision' and under significant pressure, can make correct and accurate decisions in order to help save non-combatants. At this current moment in time Britain's drone programme does not even compare to the scale of America's. Yet, if Britain is to encounter continued terrorist attacks, we will see a huge rise in the use of drones in the Middle East, thus following a similar narrative to the USA.

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'Drone Vision': Precision Ethics Theory and the Royal Air Force's use of Drones

Written by James Greenhalgh

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'Drone Vision': Precision Ethics Theory and the Royal Air Force's use of Drones

Written by James Greenhalgh

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Written at: University of Sheffield

Written for: Dr. Benedict F Docherty

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