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Book Review: Killing by Remote Control: The Ethics of an Unmanned Military

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Review of *Killing by Remote Control: The Ethics of an Unmanned Military*

Strawser, Bradley Jay, ed. *Killing by Remote Control: The Ethics of an Unmanned Military*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2013. ISBN: 978-0-19-992612-1. 296 pages.

As the use of drones in warfare has been popularized in the last decade, it has also raised increasing ethical questions regarding their use. *Killing by Remote Control: The Ethics of an Unmanned Military* is precisely about the ethical implications of killing by using remotely controlled weapons. This volume edited by Bradley Jay Strawser compiles and problematizes selected ethical challenges related to the use of killer robots.

A priori, some chapters could be interpreted as being apologetic of the use of killer drones without much criticism toward some countries' foreign policy. Rebecca J. Johnson's chapter "The Wizard of Oz Goes to War: Unmanned Systems in Counterinsurgency," with its "policy guidance" style, is the best example. Nonetheless, overall, the book successfully achieves its purpose: to sort out the main current moral debates surrounding unmanned weaponry in a more critical and specific way, so as to move away from "the nascent and thorny ethical concerns, in laundry list fashion" (Strawser 2013, 4).

The volume is structured in three parts, conforming to a standard configuration composed of a theoretical section, followed by the analysis of practical cases, and by future prospects as a concluding section. The first part setting the theoretical framework of the book— "Just War Theory and the Permissibility to Kill by Remote Control"—is probably the most overlooked. The focus is exclusively put on the suitability of the traditional Just War Theory versus the need to understand remote killing in the light of new norms and concepts that could depict a different reality underlying the use of drones. Despite the will to find out whether drones constitute a paradigmatic change, no particular conceptual suggestion is envisaged—namely in Asa Kasher and Avery Plaw's joint chapter "Distinguishing Drones: An Exchange." Besides, the issue of "justification" is put at the core of the theoretical reflection on the ethics of using unmanned weaponry, having Michael Walzer's *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* as its main reference.

Furthermore, in "Just War Theory and Remote Military Technology: A Primer," Matthew W. Hallgarth often seems to outweigh the objectivity required in a theoretical discussion. Namely, he presents his claims under the form of an influential chorus that repetitively suggests that "[m]oral responsibility applies to moral agents" (p. 37) and not to tools, and also that robots "are not evil in themselves" (pp. 37-39). Despite their formulation, these core ideas end up echoing throughout many other chapters in the book, and actually represent its most recurring message: human agency still comes first in the development, implementation, and use of unmanned weaponry, and should be taken as the fundamental focus of any ethical consideration.

One may conclude from this theoretical part that, although unmanned military vehicles are new in technical terms as a method of killing, they do not minimize the importance of justification under just war tradition. In other words, they may be new-shaped tools, but the same old moral precepts should apply.

The second and most substantive part of the volume approaches the current implementation of unmanned weaponry. Each chapter illustrates a specific practical aspect of drone employment, such as targeted killing, the warrior moral code of the operators, humanitarian military intervention, the proportionality of predation, counterinsurgency, and the asymmetry of warfare. Notwithstanding their diversity, every chapter raises awareness of the idea that human agency and moral deliberation cannot be dismissed in any equation involving the use of unmanned weaponry. This part indeed shows a general concern over the alienation that may occur if one loses awareness that human decisions and acts do have consequences, even when they materialize through machines. And so, each contribution in this part of the volume can be interpreted as the expression of that concern on different levels.

For instance, in "Drones and Targeted Killing: Angels or Assassins?" David Whetham discusses the historical evolution of targeted killing. He thus offers a well-documented and illustrated piece, with several geographical and institutional examples that explore the actual meaning of drones for the existing rules and practice of warfare. Through a historical approach, Whetham's chapter helps expand ideas on how unmanned weaponry has enabled targeted killing at a broader level of international politics.

Robert Sparrow's "War without Virtue?" focuses on the personal level, through the moral values of drone operators. His psychological, behavioral, and anthropological approach toward using unmanned weaponry specifically applies to the most agential dimensions of the issue. The distant robot control thus confronts traditional martial virtues such as courage, loyalty, honor, and mercy. Sparrow thereby addresses the recurrent concern underlying the use of unmanned weaponry: that is, the ease of attaining the operators' "faculty of judgment" (p. 85).

Another example is Uwe Steinhoff's highlight of the more structural level of unmanned weaponry. His chapter entitled "Killing Them Safely: Extreme Asymmetry and Its Discontents" is one of the most critical and mordant contributions to the volume. In it, he very confidently sustains there is no "special problem" with killing by remote control, as he justly juxtaposes to it the "general problem with generating extreme military superiority" (p. 179), of which automated and remote weapons are part. The author recalls the outdated and fundamentally asymmetrical position of the non-Westerners in war:

> [t]he use of UAV's is the latest incarnation of aerial warfare, a type of warfare whose history consists, for the most part, in white people more or less symmetrically bombing each other but *also*, and this is important, in white people […] asymmetrically and criminally […] bombing black or yellow or brown ones […] without much regard for civilians. Those black, yellow, or

> brown people might therefore have a somewhat different perspective on the alleged advantages of warfare by drones (p. 206).

Part three, regarding the future prospects of unmanned weaponry, contains two innovative contributions that contrast with the approaches of part two, in that they suggest that the future of killer drones does not need to be a perpetuation of present inaccuracies and misevaluations. In "Engineering, Ethics, and Industry: The Moral Challenges of Lethal Autonomy," George R. Lucas Jr. pragmatically attempts to clear the ethical landscape by critically denouncing the analytical uselessness of the current ethical and legal debate. He says it is marked by rhetoric, and by the "anthropomorphic, romantic nonsense attached to robotics in the popular minds" (p. 219). In turn, this conventional morality—termed "folk morality"—compromises the ethical analysis of the use of real military robots, through its rationalistic, ahistorical, and antipsychological bias. By considering that there is no need for machines to behave ethically, since they essentially have to be *safe and reliable* in their functioning, Lucas Jr. relocates the very focus of the ethical inquiry to the issue of fundamental agency and to the creation of the robots.

Throughout the book, with no exception, each author outlines the topic in considerable detail, and presents carefully structured arguments that are constantly balanced in the light of eventual counterclaims. Most chapters develop methodically tested arguments by following the rules of semiotics, even if they sometimes end up being too dense to be fluently absorbed by readers who are not familiar with this specific field of philosophy. By dedicating each chapter to a different case scenario of drone employment, with differentiated treatments, the volume effectively escapes the enumerative style it wishes to surpass, and avoids plain generalizations of what the ethical implications of killer robots are. There is also a careful commitment to maintain the dialog between the chapters through responsive arguments. Occasionally, though, this dialog may seem too extreme, namely when it takes the form of direct attacks; these sound like interpersonal competition between authors, and unfortunately eclipses the overall interest of the book.

Globally, *Killing by Remote Control* offers important insights on a broad level of moral topics, as it engages with serious aspects of killing by remote control that needed to be discussed and thoroughly exposed in methodologically coherent and structured analyses. This volume presents the reader with an interdisciplinary discussion of the moral dilemmas underlying unmanned weaponry. As such, it might be of interest to students and scholars researching on the subject who come from different academic backgrounds (International Relations, Security Studies, Intelligence Studies) and also to practitioners or even future drone operators. It offers no major innovation in terms of content, concepts, or theory; themes such as radical asymmetry, legality, the warrior ethos, or the case of Pakistan have already been exposed in other works on the same subject (see, e.g., *Armed Drones and the Ethics of War: Military Virtue in a Post-Heroic Age* by Christian Enemark (2013)). The book should rather be seen as a novelty in terms of the way it presents and develops those topics, namely for the way

ideas are methodologically organized, reasoned, and defended. Ethical reflections on the relationship between the humans and technology for warfare will always be necessary. Yet, other dimensions underlying the issue of unmanned weaponry, such as power, politics, and economics, among others, should not be dismissed, at the risk of inspiring a certain naiveté regarding such a sensitive issue.

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References

Enemark, Christian. 2013. *Armed Drones and the Ethics of War: Military Virtue in a Post-Heroic Age*. London: Routledge.

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