Viewpoints

War at a Distance – An Alternative Perspective

By Dr Rob Wheeler

Introduction

Gp Capt Blount in the last issue of *Air Power Review* raised sundry moral issues associated with Remotely Piloted Air Systems (RPAS). He concluded that "a failure to properly justify remote warfare may severely constrain the use of otherwise war-winning systems" and called for a debate. This article argues that, far from raising any moral difficulties, the benefits of RPAS may even impose a moral duty on commanders to employ them when a choice presents itself.

As in the original article, it will be assumed here that the conditions for a just war apply. The use of lethal force is therefore acceptable in principle; what is at issue is the manner in which it is employed.

It may be helpful to start by setting out six principles which it is intended to establish. These will then be discussed in turn.

1. *A man is responsible for his actions, including unintended consequences.*
2. *Remoteness is irrelevant.*
3. *Autonomy does not in principle change anything.*
4. *Nor does risk to the actor.*
5. *Empathy has its dangers.*
6. *Narrative is a matter of tactics, not of morals.*

Responsibility

That a man is responsible for his actions is a fundamental tenet of all moral systems. There are exceptions: we speak of the 'age of discretion', meaning that those below that age may lack the knowledge of what is right and what is wrong; likewise insanity may be held to render a man guiltless. The main difficulty in this case concerns unintended consequences.

If I walk out into the street, point a gun at a person going about his normal business and kill him, I have committed murder. If I fire a gun into the air on a whim and the round in falling to earth kills that man, I am guilty of manslaughter. I had not intended to kill him, but I am still responsible for the consequences of my reckless action.

At this point proportionality comes into play. If I fire a weapon in self-defence and the round ricochets off some hard object and kills that same innocent bystander, I should, I trust, be judged to have acted in a morally acceptable manner; the poor victim was simply unlucky. If, on the other hand, I spot someone aiming a catapult at me and I call in a nuclear strike against him, then I might well be judged to have acted disproportionately, and be held responsible for any collateral damage caused.

Gauging proportionality requires a degree of judgement. The level of judgement expected will depend on the experience of the person exercising it. A policeman accustomed to restraining malefactors is expected to cause them less harm in the process than a householder who apprehends a burglar.

Remoteness

Members of armed forces engaging in combat may do so at varying degrees of remoteness. The Roman legionary was expected to kill with his sword an opponent who was a foot or less in front of him. The Second World War Typhoon pilot might be firing his gun at a tank several hundred yards away. The present-day Tornado pilot may have occasion to employ a weapon against an adversary several miles away whom he can see only by the monitor of his targeting pod. And the Reaper pilot may be sitting in another continent.

At no point in this sequence does anything change in principle. The Reaper pilot probably has more time than the others to consider all the consequences of his action. He is certainly at less personal risk. He should be in reasonable comfort, whereas the Roman legionary was liable to be cold, tired and hungry. A greater degree of judgement might therefore be expected of him. But the principle has not changed.

Autonomy

All actions start a chain of consequences that cannot wholly be predicted. For the Roman legionary wielding a short sword, the immediate effect of his blows was very predictable. As soon as ballistic weapons were employed, there was doubt about where they would land and who would be in the impact area. Commanders at every level have always faced more

complex responsibilities than the men doing the fighting. They issue orders. They may assume that the men they direct will follow those orders but they have a duty to ensure that the orders they issue are as clear as conditions allow and take such account as is feasible of any change in circumstances that may occur. The Charge of the Light Brigade is the most famous example of ambiguous orders causing needless deaths to their recipients, though this is not the place to address the question of who in this case was negligent and to what degree.[1] Similar issues arise where ambiguous orders lead to unintended harm to non-combatants.

The recipients of orders may be presumed to moderate their actions in accordance with the Law of Armed Conflict. But the use of technology which is unable to exercise discrimination goes back to the Bronze Age.[2] The anti-personnel mine may perhaps be considered inherently immoral, but guided weapons have been with us for more than half a century; their ability to distinguish between different types of target is often rudimentary, and it is the duty of those who employ them to exercise such judgement in their use that proportionality between intended and unintended consequences is maintained.

Autonomous unmanned vehicles represent something of an intermediate case, being able to apply more complex algorithms than a missile but without the moral sense of a man. It is difficult to see how something that is intermediate between two existing cases can introduce any new principle.

As for the engineers who program such devices, they owe a duty of care, as does anyone building and selling any equipment. Such a duty cannot guard against all eventualities, any more than the most skilled Roman smith could guarantee that the sword he produced would not shatter and kill the man who wielded it. Proportionality in the employment of complex weapons must include consideration of the possibility that they will not perform in the expected manner.

Personal Risk

The view is sometimes expressed that the morality of killing animals for sport depends on a balance of risk between the hunter and his prey. Thus tiger hunting might be thought acceptable, because a clever tiger can drop out of a tree onto the hunter, whereas in pheasant shooting the only risk to the sportsman is from the other guns. But whatever might be the morality of killing for sport, war is not a sport.

It has been noted earlier that the degree of judgement to be expected is diminished when the person exercising that judgement is under stress. Cold, fatigue and hunger were mentioned. But one of the greatest sources of stress is enemy action, seeing one's mates killed and injured and fearing the same outcome for oneself. Counterinsurgency demands particularly good judgement and the Vietnam war offers some of the classic cases. Gp Capt Blount mentions My Lai; there was an outstanding book written by a USMC officer who was tried for murder

before a military court in Vietnam,[3] and who tries to describe the nature of that stress. Lest the reader suppose that these effects are limited to particular individuals, or can be avoided by the British way of war, he should read some of the studies of British operations in Palestine prior to 1939,[4] which make it clear that whole units regarded 'firmness' as a licence for indiscriminate maltreatment of the subject population.

Given this phenomenon, there is perhaps a moral duty on the commander to employ RPAS in preference to 'boots on the ground' whenever the choice presents itself.

Empathy

The soldier is frequently required to kill his opponent. Empathy has often been seen as a danger to military discipline.[5] It is commonly countered by demonising the other side, by inculcating the idea that they are subhuman, or barbarians, or savages. That too can lead to errors of judgement. Far better to inculcate a *Play Station* mentality.

One aspect of this is that RPAS operations, like computer games, can be re-played. Rules can be laid down and enforced by reviewing questionable episodes. It is true of course that during the replay the final outcome is known, whereas during the original episode lives may have been at risk. However, the same applies to Air Traffic Control, and has never been regarded as an impediment to the review of decisions on the basis of a replay of the tapes.

Constructing Narratives

Finally one must face the accusation that it is not manly to wage war by sitting at computer screens in an air-conditioned office. This is not a consequence of fighting remotely but rather a consequence of not fighting on equal terms. We have no intention of fighting on equal terms, because that would imply equal casualties and we have more concern for the lives of our soldiers than our opponents have for theirs. So this is an accusation to which we will always be vulnerable.

Against that, the RPAS can be presented as all-seeing and just, a righteous avenger of the wicked actions of its victims. There is evidence that such a narrative has made some progress in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan.[6] It helps, of course, that the inhabitants of such areas have experienced the Land-based alternative and can compare the discrimination of an RPAS against that of an artillery barrage.

Ultimately, this article is about morality. Whether a particular tactic or a particular course of action lends itself to the conduct of information operations is not a moral question.

Conclusion

Remotely Piloted Air Vehicles raise no new moral issues.

If the conclusion really can be stated in one line, it raises the question of why so many authors

find so much to write about the ethics of technologically-based warfare. It may be helpful to stand back from the moral argument itself and look briefly at the causes of confusion. A recent piece by Sanderød[7] is helpful for this, by posing the question: Does 'collateral damage due to incorrect bombing' indicate that there is a mismatch between the perception of air power and its usage in recent wars? He cites the use of terms like *surgical* as evidence of popular perceptions.

There is actually a double misperception here: a lot of surgical procedures – open-heart surgery, for example – involve the infliction of major trauma in order for the surgeon to get at the problem. War is similar, in that much harm is done to innocent people, to economies, and to the environment, in order to rectify an evil that is seen as so great that this trauma is justified. That is why the tests for a just war laid down since the time of Thomas Aquinas include *necessity* – there must be no viable alternative – and an expectation of success.

Sanderød suggests that the ability of Air power to offer a 'clean war' lowers the threshold for war. In other words, nations are prepared to embark on wars which they would have avoided had Air power not been available. The recent operation in Libya would appear to provide an excellent example. Air power offered a means of intervening to avert imminent catastrophe. When that decision was taken, it was difficult to foresee the exact manner in which the problem would finally be resolved. There were hopes that the regime might collapse through internal pressures. But the assessment was made – one presumes – that, even in the absence of such collapse, there were exit strategies that would leave the citizens of Libya happier and more secure than if intervention had not occurred. In the event, that assessment proved correct. Military intervention proved a 'force for good', and most certainly would not have been undertaken at all had it required a land-based invasion.

What concerns Sanderød – or the authors he quotes – is that a misperception of the efficacy of Air power might cause nations to embark upon wars which are not morally justified, either because the harm that will be caused is out of proportion to the benefits, or because the chances of success are over-estimated. He is right to be concerned. False optimism is a very great danger. It is incumbent on nations contemplating military action to examine in advance the likely effects of their action. This requires prior preparation. Just as one cannot wage war without building and honing armed forces, so one cannot assess effects without developing, within academia or elsewhere, a body of mathematicians, social scientists and historians able to undertake such assessments when occasion requires.

None of this affects the ethics of air power as such, still less does it affect the ethics of RPAS. But it is close enough to the matter to explain the unease which clearly afflicts so many writers on these topics.

Notes

[1] See, for example, Cecil Woodham-Smith, *The Reason why*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960).
[2] "They have digged a pit before me, into the midst whereof they are fallen themselves " – Psalm 57 v6.
[3] Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War*, (New York: Henry Holt, 1996).
[4] M Hughes, "The Banality of Brutality: British Armed Forces and the Repression of the Arab Revolt in Palestine, 1936-39", *English Historical Review*, Vol. CXXIV, No. 507, pp 314-354.
[5] See Richard Holmes, Redcoat, (London: Harper Collins, 2001), 373-4, on Anglo-French fraternisation during the Peninsular campaign. That and the famous Christmas truce of 1914 suggest that such concern may have been unnecessary.
[6] Farhat Taj, "The year of the drone misinformation", *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 21(3), 2010, 529-535.
[7] Steinar Sanderød, *The use of Air Power Today: Have new Ethical Challenges occurred*?, in Joel Hayward (ed), *Air Power, Insurgency and the "War on Terror"* , (RAF Centre for Air Power Studies, Cranwell: 2009).