Distant Intimacy: Space, Drones, and Just War

John Williams

This article considers how space, understood conceptually and informed by political geography, affects the ethics of targeted killing facilitated by drones. It identifies an important gap in how ethical debates about the use of armed drones have developed and why established just war categories and principles provide an insufficient context for that debate. The article develops the idea of "distant intimacy"[1] to reveal the spatial and ethical distinctiveness of the relationship between drone operators and their targets, and it explains why this space is poorly conceptualized in just war literature. Critical engagement with the concept of space, rooted in political geography, augments established ethical critiques of drone strikes. As drone use grows, it is crucial that ethical assessment adapts to the distinctive spatial relationship between drone operators and their targets.

The article proceeds with a brief consideration of two well-studied components of the drone debate: the ethical significance of distance and the ethical implications of technology's capacity to grant drone operators intimate knowledge of the lives of their targets, thus contributing to the ability of operators to fulfill *jus in bello* requirements. Subsequently, I look at how this combination of distance and intimacy establishes the importance of space as an analytical category, and suggest that space is badly neglected in just war thinking. I also argue that insights from critical political geography can assist us in clarifying the ethical significance of space and the ethical distinctiveness of the spatial relationship enabled by drones in their facilitation of targeted killing. I introduce the concept of "dronespace" to refer to the highly distinctive and radically asymmetrical relationship of "distant intimacy" between operator and target. Within dronespace, two central elements of just war theory's understanding of ethical subjectivity—autonomy and

Ethics & International Affairs, 29, no. 1 (2015), pp. 93–110.

doi:10.1017/S0892679414000793

reciprocity—are radically reworked such that the relationship of operator and target becomes exclusively one-directional. The ostensible ability of drones to enhance compliance with *jus in bello* norms is subverted by the construction of radical asymmetry, establishing distant intimacy as ethically problematic.

Distance

The deployment of drones[2] for airstrikes since 2002 has inspired a substantial literature,[3] including assessing their military effectiveness, legality, and ability to fulfill ethical requirements, among other issues.[4] One common question is whether the radical distancing between the drone's pilot and their target is ethically significant. The distancing of weapons system operators from their targets is nothing new. From ancient weapons, such as spears, slings, bows, and catapults, through firearms and artillery, to intercontinental ballistic missiles, military technology has made it possible for attackers to be increasingly distant from their targets. In this sense, a drone is no different from other long-range missile systems, except that it is not destroyed in the attack and can return to base for reuse.[5]

The potential for distance to reduce constraints on the use of force, and thus weaken the observation of *jus ad bellum* restrictions, is well known and is often asserted in relation to drones.[6] What is today called "force protection" is a longstanding legitimate concern well served by reducing the necessity for hand-to-hand combat by increasing the distance from one's adversary, especially via a technology the adversary cannot readily counter.[7] Thus, weapons have been described as "distancing technologies,"[8] and in this regard drones clearly confer very great advantages. Current drone operators enjoy effective invulnerability from physical attack by those they target; the weapon system does not distance them from their targets in inherently dangerous ways; and potentially fatal consequences are not necessarily introduced into the pilot's life as they are for the crews of manned aircraft, submarines, or surface warships. Instead, the harms drone operators face tend to be emotional and psychological, including those associated with the level of knowledge they gain about their targets, and arising from the psychological disjuncture between intense and stressful operations juxtaposed with returning immediately to everyday domestic life. Indeed, levels of mental health problems faced by drone operators are comparable to those of conventional combat pilots.[9]

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679414000793 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Drone pilots enjoy additional benefits: Power projection combined with force protection enables military operations in environments too hostile or too logistically challenging to sustain deployment of human beings or the use of inhabited weapons systems. This has lead such scholars as Bradley Strawser to argue for the moral "duty to employ uninhabited aerial vehicles" where doing so reduces risk to humans pursuing justified operations and where the use of unmanned aerial vehicles does not compromise compliance with discrimination and proportionality.[10] Asa Kasher goes further, saying that states have a moral obligation to use technology to protect their citizens serving in the armed forces even when this increases risks to what he labels "enemy civilians."[11]

Enjoyment of the force protection benefits brought by distance relies on asymmetry between the military capability of those deploying drones and their adversaries. Current armed drones, the MQ-9 Reaper and MQ-1 Predator, fly comparatively slowly, have limited maneuverability, and are not significantly protected by stealth technology or defensive electronic warfare systems. They would be comparatively easy targets for the air forces of middle-ranking technological powers or groups with access to modern surface-to-air missiles or high quality anti-aircraft artillery. However, this will change, and is already changing. The U.S. Air Force uses remotely piloted F-16s to enhance the verisimilitude of pilot training, enabling combat practice against "the real thing." Should the U.S. Air Force operate in more symmetrical combat environments than Afghanistan, it is not hard to envisage a Mach 2/9-G–capable drone with a substantial weapons payload engaging in real combat.[12]

This crude summary of the distance element of the argument explains why some dismiss the purported novelty of drones based on the distance between operator and target.[13] Within *jus in bello*, distance typically reduces accuracy, thus increasing the challenge of discrimination. Distance can also encourage the use of more destructive weapons and tactics, because those deploying them do not suffer their immediate effects, challenging proportionality. Within *jus ad bellum*, distance may make states more willing to go to war, believing that conducting war at a distance will insulate them from its consequences, and therefore cause them to lower the prudential thresholds of proportionality and reasonable prospects of success. Distance may perhaps even cause states to reinterpret and expand the principle of just cause to include principles and cases that would not be pursued if war was conducted at close quarters.[14]

Intimacy

Typically, the discussion of *jus in bello* aspects of drone use suggests drones can be accommodated within existing accounts of just war theory.[15] What is at stake is whether drones enable more effective observation of discrimination and proportionality in comparison with alternative weapons. Debate usually focuses on whether those killed by drones are accurately identified as legitimate targets (the discrimination issue) and whether "collateral damage" is defensible in relation to the military advantage gained through these operations (the proportionality principle). Advocates of drones argue that they present significant advantages in relation to discrimination and proportionality, resulting from the superior quality of information about targets that drones provide and the improved quality of decision-making they permit.[16]

How does "intimacy" relate to the claims about improved information and decision-making? That drones enable acquisition of more and better information about targets than most alternative tactics seems quite clear. Alternatives, such as ground surveillance teams, which *could be* superior, carry considerable costs in terms of logistical challenges and increased risks to team members operating in hostile environments. While this article focuses on armed drones, recall that the development of drones, and the overwhelming majority of contemporary drone deployment, is driven by "ISR"—intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance. The much-touted "long loiter" capability of drones means they can sustain surveillance of possible targets for extended periods of time, potentially days or even weeks. The quality of the sensory arrays that drones deploy means more and better data can be analyzed to increase the probability that the person targeted is correctly identified and meets the criteria of a permissible target.[17] As Mark Coeckelbergh argues, drones have begun to reverse the "de-facing" associated with distance, restoring to some extent the intimate connection between drone operators and their targets.[18] As will be discussed in more detail below, this partial restoration of intimacy is asymmetric: only the drone operator gains insight into the life of his adversary, sees his face, and witnesses his pain and death.

In relation to intimacy's second element—the claim about improved decision-making—drone data can be assessed free from pressures, risks, and stresses affecting members of a ground surveillance team or a pilot engaging a target. Furthermore, drone operators share data with colleagues and commanders, in real time, enabling collaborative decision-making properly informed by a range

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679414000793 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of expertise. This idealized image of experienced, dedicated, well-informed professionals making measured, calm, well-reasoned decisions about whether they have sufficient information to be confident they have correctly identified their target and that the target is a permissible one, and then choosing their moment to attack in order to minimize collateral damage, is at the heart of most advocacy of drone strikes as an ethically superior way of war.[19]

Furthermore, drones' sensory arrays are augmented by additional information sources, potentially in real time, or close to it. Advanced network analysis software enables data from the drone to be cross-checked against other sources, building up a more detailed picture of how the targeted individual(s) may fit into a wider network. This software builds connections between "persons of interest" and brings others, previously unidentified, into view. As Kyle Grayson suggests, it allows for the potential "to immediately locate, position, and track persons of interest across a governmental environment that is being conceived on a planetary scale."[20] Communication intercepts, human intelligence from agents and informants, and analysis of patterns of life all play into determining the permissibility of targeting an individual. This offers a level of discrimination unimaginable twenty years ago.[21] Arguably, this leads to more proportionate use of force by reducing collateral damage, which is likely to continue advancing as munitions with smaller payloads are deployed with greater precision and the quality of software systems modeling the effects of different weapons systems improves.[22]

To sum up, the intimacy of drone strikes offers an unprecedented level of specifically personal information about an individual's identity and his or her life, a level of information previously unavailable save via expensive, uncertain, and dangerous operations, such as infiltrating agents into a target network or "turning" an existing network member at great personal risk to the informant.

"Signature strikes" that identify targets through patterns of behavior rather than specific information about named individuals also display intimacy. Associating in some way with "known militants," repeatedly crossing certain borders, being present in certain areas at specific times, being caught by a drone's cameras engaging in suspicious activity can all, in combination, be enough to single someone out for targeting. As Grayson notes, personalized strikes involve

> the decontextualisation of the killing from the broader conflict by focusing upon the claimed characteristics of the specific person killed. The individual is found to be deserving of such a death not just because of their potential capabilities, but also due to their perceived intentions being considered uncivil. Being targeted is therefore an

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679414000793 Published online by Cambridge University Press

indicator that one has been primarily determined to be an illegitimate political subject rather than an important one.[23]

This suggests a deeper critique than debate over the numbers of "high value targets," "low-level militants," and "civilians" killed by drones. Geographical contextualization of intimacy highlights that an individual's status within the wider conflict is only one part of this issue. Being singled out for killing is an act of spatial intimacy. The drone operator's detailed knowledge of the life and death of the target can serve to partially restore the visceral personal experience of combat that distance has done so much to negate. Rather than "screening" the killer from the killed, the drone operator experiences some of the intimacy of combat that phenomenological approaches to ethics see as important to understanding the distinct ethical relationship between combatants in war.[24]

The reality of drone strikes, however, is that they are not always perfectly conducted,[25] and sometimes the wrong people are killed. Intelligence failures occur, attacks are mistimed or misdirected, and operators make mistakes.[26] These, taken alone, are insufficient reasons to dismiss the ethical defensibility of drone strikes. But if drone use results in more of the wrong people being killed than would otherwise be the case, then we have a reason for skepticism about the positive portrayal of the ethics of drone strikes. The evidence for reaching that conclusion with confidence, however, is simply unavailable. Counting and classifying the victims of drone strikes is hampered by unreliable data, something notably worsened by the failure of the United States, as the world's leading user of armed drones, to make available its own data about the outcome of such strikes, especially those conducted by the CIA.[27]

This problem is exacerbated by the necessarily speculative nature of comparative analyses of discrimination and proportionality. U.S. counterterrorism operations in Pakistan or elsewhere cannot be replicated deploying different techniques each time —drones, manned aircraft, or special forces teams, for instance—in order to produce data that would enable direct comparison. Avery Plaw estimates drones are better in terms of discrimination than the plausible alternatives, and are better at killing "high value targets." His account seems reasonable and measured, and, to move forward with the debate, I accept his assertions for the time being.[28] Clearly, there is more to be done here, and work would be greatly aided by the U.S. government complying with the United Nations' request for the release of data.[29]

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679414000793 Published online by Cambridge University Press

These initial observations about distance and intimacy do not resolve the debate about whether drones are "ethical" in relation to just war theory's usual criteria of discrimination and proportionality, or in relation to the extent to which they excessively privilege force protection. Instead, this brief summary of two familiar elements of contemporary debate about drones sets the scene for considering the neglect of the concept of *space* in just war theory.

Space

Space is a central topic in political geography, but it is almost totally neglected in just war theory. Critical political geographers have long been interested in how spatial terms and concepts construct political understandings and representations that "frame" political phenomena.[30] Critical assessment of these framings reveals power structures inherent in language describing political space, privileging certain discourses over others, politicizing and depoliticizing certain forms of space, and protecting certain interests. Representations of political space through maps is one familiar instance of how these power dynamics play out, with cartography being far more than a neutral, technical exercise.

Derek Gregory notes that "as cartographic reason falters and military violence is loosed from its frames, the conventional ties between war and geography have come undone . . . . Late modern war is being transformed by the slippery spaces within which and through which it is being conducted."[31] For example, political geographers such as Stuart Elden have explored the vertical dimensions of political space—including height above and depth below the ground—which have major implications for security issues, especially surrounding airpower, including drones.[32] These types of insights from political geography are being applied elsewhere. For example, the concept of "battlespace" is now ubiquitous in military discourse, replacing the two-dimensional "battlefield" with a self-consciously four-dimensional concept, adding time and depth to breadth and length.[33] Furthermore, battlespace can include cyberspace: a battlespace can be anywhere and everywhere, real and virtual.[34] The notion of a "seamless" battlespace—across which drones, special forces, intelligence operatives, and other, more conventional military elements range in integrated operations—exemplifies this altered spatiality. The ability to frame space in this way, and to design and deploy military assets effectively within it, reinforces the asymmetry that has dominated the U.S. military experience since Vietnam. Technological sophistication, symbolized by the idea of

the Revolution in Military Affairs as enabling the United States to escape the spatial and temporal confines affecting less advanced (and less well-resourced) militaries, has conferred immense advantage. Converting that into military success has, of course, been rather harder.

Just war's traditional categories remain connected to the Clausewitzian paradigm of war as analogous to a duel, both in micro-terms of individual engagements and in macro-terms of the relationship between the parties. Asymmetry challenges the duel metaphor's ability to ground ethical assessment. The technologically mediated asymmetric battlespace produces the distant intimacy of drone strikes as a very particular ethical relationship. The ethical status of individuals becomes dependent on their location in battlespace, which, in the case of drone operators and targets, takes a very distinctive form that warps the usual account of the relationship between physical and emotional distance. An appreciation of critical geography helps to reveal how just war theory's underdeveloped account of space creates ethical asymmetry such that the ethical subjectivity of drone targets becomes entirely dependent on the construction of space by those targeting them.

Political geography's critique of space challenges conventional debates about the legal classification of sovereign, territorial space. For instance, Mary Ellen O'Connell argues that the use of drones in Pakistan is illegal because the United States is not in an armed conflict with Pakistan. In O'Connell's view, international law therefore does not permit the United States to deploy lethal force—even with Pakistani consent. Afghanistan, as a zone of armed conflict, is a different matter.[35] The border marks a sharp legal divide between a zone of armed conflict, where drone strikes are permissible, and a zone where drone strikes are necessarily illegal. Other lawyers offer less clear-cut assessments, but still see the legal classification of territory as crucial to the legality of drone strikes.[36] Gregory, for example, argues that focusing on legality "works to marginalise ethics and politics by making available a seemingly neutral, objective language: disagreement and debate then become purely technical issues that involve matters of opinion, certainly, but not values."[37] Grayson concurs, noting that "not only does the incorporation of legal frameworks provide an extra-strategic legitimating rationale for targeted killing, but the resort to the complexities of the law potentially de-politicizes the practice by presenting its acceptability as a technical question for legal experts."[38]

The Obama administration, like its predecessor, similarly maintains the argument that the United States is engaged in armed conflict with terrorist groups

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679414000793 Published online by Cambridge University Press

located in and operating across various state jurisdictions, such that attacks against them, in self-defense, cannot be limited to the territory of one state—Afghanistan. This is a "global war on terror," even though the Obama administration is wary of the phrase, and thus sovereign state boundaries offer an inappropriate spatial framework. Where the "terrorists" are, is, essentially, a zone of armed conflict, and the United States is entitled to strike its enemies there.[39] Steve Niva notes how "in 2009, President Obama authorized the drone war to target anyone in Pakistan's tribal areas it considered a potential threat, without authorization from outside the CIA as long as targets were in approved geographical 'boxes' near the Afghan border."[40] It was, of course, the United States that decided where those boxes were to be drawn, and reserved the right to redraw them.

Another spatial claim augments this logic of permissible intervention, suggesting that where states are unable to exercise authority envisaged by the sovereign ideal, others may step in. If the local government cannot or will not effectively control terrorist groups within their borders, the targets of those terrorist groups may act, ideally with the permission and cooperation of the sovereign government, but in extremis unilaterally. This is summed up by the idea of "ungoverned areas," often referred to as "havens" for terrorists.[41] Thus, Pakistani and Yemeni sovereignty is in doubt because their respective governments cannot or will not exercise effective authority in parts of their territory. In the Pakistani case this lack of authority is so great that the Federally Administered Tribal Areas bordering Afghanistan are routinely used by Afghani groups for operations against U.S. and other forces inside Afghanistan and elsewhere. Pakistan's government, too, is targeted by such groups on occasion, while some elements of the Pakistani government, principally the Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence, are alleged to collude with the Pakistani Taliban and elements of al-Qaeda for their own reasons.[42]

As with the positive account of the discrimination, proportionality, and force-protection benefits of drones, the factual veracity of these portrayals is not the point at issue here. That they are common arguments seems uncontroversial, establishing the significance of space in debate about the ethics of drones. What just war analysis has largely neglected, though, is the nature of the space that drones themselves create—as opposed to the legal status of the airspace they fly in. A critical study of that space opens the door to more innovative and interesting accounts of the ethics of drone use. Again, some of the tools of critical political geography are useful in casting fresh light on our spatial constructions and

metaphors. Targeted killing is not just a form of "spatial management," as Grayson claims;[43] it is a way of inscribing that space with ethical significance.

Dronespace

The distant intimacy of drones serves as a striking illustration of spatial flexibility. By this I mean that the space where drones operate is not just their immediate surroundings, spanning as that does thousands of miles between (for instance) the operator in Nevada, the drone's service base in Afghanistan, and the target in Pakistan's Swat Valley. As noted, weapons operators have been very distant from their targets for a long time. Rather, space is more extensive, incorporating the virtual space of data streams that have brought specific, individual targets to the attention of the operator's commanders. It also includes the satellite systems that enable communication between operator and drone, making it extraterrestrial, too. All of this is held together by a real-time temporality. The concept of "assemblage" has been applied to drones by Alison Williams to show how drone operators can be understood as elements or components of a complex technological system.[44]

What is most important from an ethical perspective about dronespace is asymmetry. As critical political geographers stress, and my brief discussion of space illustrates, space is a political concept rooted in and expressive of power relationships. The construction, possession, and utilization of knowledge within a spatial context that itself manifests power inequalities creates, enables, and legitimizes a relationship that, in this instance, is distinctively, and possibly uniquely, asymmetrical. Dronespace places all of the cards—every one of them—in the hand of the drone operator. Distant intimacy is ethically significant and problematic because it challenges some basic concepts typically deployed to establish, understand, and assess the ethical quality of relationships between human beings and the choices that are possible.

The first challenge is to the target's autonomy. Autonomy is a major component of just war debates, especially during the last decade as more formal analytical philosophical work has become increasingly prominent.[45] In just war theorizing there has been a shift toward rights-based approaches that stress how targeting decisions and the liability of those targeted are complex choices. "Role-based" accounts, such as Michael Walzer's analysis of the combatant/noncombatant boundary, ascribe an individual's liability to lethal force

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679414000793 Published online by Cambridge University Press

principally on the basis of adoption of a role.[46] Rights-based accounts, on the other hand, argue that liability to lethal force must reflect something specific about the targeted individual: he must have done something (or is imminently about to do something) to which lethal force is an appropriate response. This stresses the ethical importance of the autonomous choice of the individual to engage in activity that he knows renders him potentially liable to lethal force. Moreover, autonomy is retained, at least partially, in conventional military situations because humans may cease those actions through surrender or withdrawal from military operations.

You cannot surrender to a Reaper.[47] Within dronespace the target's autonomy is fundamentally compromised in this sense. That is true, of course, for a combatant targeted by a B-52 bomber, Tomahawk missile, or a host of other weapons systems. Yet these do not claim to possess the intimacy of drones—the discriminatory precision based on enhanced intelligence gathering and personalized targeting. By making military operations personal, drones exacerbate the problem of less discriminate weapons systems that obliterate individual autonomy by their nature, by holding out a promise of precision that is a one-way deal. Ostensible respect for the target's autonomy comes at the paradoxical price of removing his autonomy over his fate. He is targeted as an autonomous individual—a specific person—yet is denied the last resort of individual autonomy in warfare: the chance to surrender. This, therefore, is a more extensive objection to drone use on the grounds of radical asymmetry than the standard critique,[48] that is, the "intuition . . . that killing someone in such a manner is profoundly disrespectful . . . . Such distance makes warfare seem too clinical or cold-hearted."[49] As a critical consideration of space highlights, it is not the distance between drone operator and target at the moment of attack that is ethically significant; it is the construction of four-dimensional space in which the drone deployer claims authority over every aspect of the target's life—past, present, and future—and the fact that this information is used to determine the moment and manner of its ending. While the intimate knowledge of a target's life that a drone operator possesses may restore some element of the target's humanity in the eyes of the operator,[50] it is nevertheless a humanity that it constructed solely and exclusively on terms set by the operator.

Within dronespace, reinforcing the novelty of its asymmetry, the drone operator's autonomy is enhanced by the choices drones provide through data gathering and processing and by the long-loiter capability that increases options as to when

to attack. That all data about the target is not subject to challenge by the target further compromises the target's autonomy. He cannot intercede in debates taking place among the drone operator, the commanders, the legal advisers, and others. Again, this is a difference of degree in relation to other weapons systems. The meticulous planning of fire-bombing raids against Dresden or Cologne, for instance, allowed no moment of consideration for the views of their targets, but the indiscriminate and impersonal nature of such attacks marks a crucial point of difference from the intimacy of drone strikes and the highly personalized asymmetry of dronespace. Respect for and protection of human rights is ostensibly enhanced by drone technologies via improved compliance with discrimination and proportionality. Yet, simultaneously, the rights-holding, autonomous human being underpinning the necessity for discrimination and proportionality is negated by the asymmetry of dronespace.

Reciprocity is a second ethical principle rewritten in dronespace. The physical invulnerability of drone operators shatters a commonplace element of conventional just war thinking, that is, the moral equality of combatants that establishes reciprocal acknowledgement of the distinctive position each occupies. Reciprocity manifests in various ways, most obviously via the combatants' shared physical vulnerability. This need not be a narrow interpretation—for example, that the attacker be equally vulnerable to the attacked at the moment of attack—but it represents an intuition about war that those who participate are vulnerable and that mutual vulnerability establishes a degree of reciprocity among combatants.[51] The extent of and respect for reciprocity is variable, of course, and collapses entirely on occasion, but the distant intimacy of dronespace renders this formulation inapplicable. While the drone operator knows a great deal about the target and holds him in a position of immense vulnerability, the target cannot know anything about his antagonist. Reciprocity through mutual vulnerability is inapplicable in this situation.

Not all just war theorists accept the moral equality of combatants. Jeff McMahan argues that combatants in an unjust cause are not the moral equals of those fighting for a just cause, and acts of violence they commit in pursuit of injustice are morally unjustifiable.[52] McMahan offers powerful arguments for skepticism about a critique of drones based on the absence of reciprocity of vulnerability. However, these arguments assume that unjust combatants fighting for an unjust cause pose a real risk to the just warriors they face, and that those unjust warriors may not invoke moral equality rooted in their right to self-defense in any efforts they may make to resist. In the case of drones, there is no possibility of

intentional harmful resistance by the target. The right to self-defense that provides the bedrock of McMahan's critique is effectively inoperable. While that does not fully refute McMahan's point—the defenders of Hiroshima had no operational possibility of resisting the Enola Gay—it underlines how the accumulation of differences of degree in asymmetry and the distinctiveness of dronespace consistently stretch the logic of just war categories and concepts to reveal the necessity of explicit critical consideration of spatial issues.

The distant intimacy of drones represents the apogee and nadir of the individuation of military action. The apogee because strikes can target individuals subject to sustained surveillance drawing on multiple, sometimes real-time, intelligence sources, thus granting unprecedented insight into the target's life. The nadir because the target's autonomy as an individual is removed through the absence of meaningful participation in the process that makes one a target or the possession of any significant means of self-defense or way to surrender. McMahan's rejection of combatants' moral equality on the basis that those fighting an unjust war are not the moral equals of their just adversaries does not strip those unjust warriors of their right to self-defense should they come under unjust attack.[53] Similarly, Strawser's argument for the duty to minimize risks faced by just warriors does not strip their targets of the right to self-defense against unjust attack.[54] Both McMahan and Strawser, however, miss how dronespace *necessarily* precludes reciprocity: it strips from targets their right to self-defense as part of their incorporation into this novel spatial realm. In the case of signature strikes, it reduces them to data streams representing patterns of behavior suggesting potential future harm or "affiliation" with named individuals.[55]

Reciprocity can be considered more widely than in this individualized account. Within dronespace, the social context that matters is that of the drone operators: preventing attacks on the United States, its citizens, interests, and allies is all that counts. The context within which the target lives is a very distant secondary consideration, if one at all. The consequences for family life, education, social cohesion, religious observation, and the health of civil society are all marginalized, yet substantially affected by drone deployment.[56] Devoting disproportionate attention to the social and cultural impact of deploying drones precludes consideration of the wider sociocultural needs of targets. As Ian Shaw suggests, the moral superiority of a U.S. way of life that must be protected is assumed and embedded in the permissive conditions of dronespace.[57] Any alternative is neither imaginable nor permissible.

Distant intimacy offers a better account of the ethical qualms many feel about the "unfairness" or "immorality" of drone strikes. Such objections are naïve. The notion of war as glorious, chivalric, or heroic, and the idea of a code of honor between combatants who are broadly equal and who compete in something like a "fair fight" modeled on a duel, are historical relics divorced from the conduct of war in an industrial and postindustrial age. It seems doubtful that war was ever like that for the vast majority of its participants, and it was certainly not so for almost all of the innocent bystanders caught up in its horrors. Asking political and military leaders to abandon technology that enhances force protection (definitely) and increases precision and proportionality (arguably) by appealing to ideals of chivalry is highly unrealistic.[58] The just war tradition is characterized by its willingness to engage with and reflect trends in military technology, strategy, and tactics; thus, it would be perverse if contemporary just war scholars were to take such a stand. Nevertheless, such intuitions do speak to deep-rooted and ethically important notions, such as the dignity and autonomy of the individual and the reciprocity of combat. It is through these concepts that we can better grasp the nature of the ethical challenges of the distant intimacy of dronespace. The ethical excision of the human beings that are the targets of drones, and of their lifeworlds, is the most telling aspect of this space.

Ethics, Space, and Just War

What would a spatial element of just war theory look like and where would it fit within the familiar categorization? Space, self-evidently, is not a prudential criterion, such as reasonable prospects of success; nor is it an ethical principle analogous to just cause or legitimate authority. Spatiality is a condition of the possibility of ethics, not an ethic in itself. A spatial dimension to just war theory is not an add-on or augmentation of the familiar structure and criteria. Drones create a highly distinctive spatial relationship—distant intimacy—that is uniquely asymmetric. The paradigmatic space of just war theory—the battlefield—and the paradigmatic claim about the nature of war—Clausewitz's analogy of the duel—are transcended in most forms of asymmetric war, but particularly so in dronespace. This new type of space is not a battlefield and it is not a duel.

Space must be taken more seriously as a condition of the possibility of ethics because space is not neutral. As critical geographers have argued for two decades, how we understand, construct, and portray space—including as "natural" or

"neutral"—is political. Choices to utilize technological innovation in pursuit of military advantage are routine subjects for just war theory, but choices about understanding the space that technology creates are not. Drones help explain why this should change and how. The role of technologies, such as drones, in establishing distinctive political space and facilitating opportunities to more fully and effectively comply with established strictures of just war is one clear element of the need for a spatial dimension in just war theory. Dronespace creates a spatial realm in which the operator comes almost face-to-face with his target. The illusion of proximity—lost through previous technological manifestations of distance—is restored by drones and can endure for a timespan that is unavailable through other systems, such as manned aircraft.[59] This space is radically asymmetrical, explaining the illusory proximity it creates, because the target has no role within it. Their ability to exercise meaningful autonomy as a human subject and to reciprocate within dronespace is effectively nullified by the spatial relationship of distant intimacy.

Portraying distant intimacy in these terms is to comply, at least broadly, with positive portrayals of drones outlined earlier in this article.[60] Taking seriously claims about drones as more ethical weapons enables a focus on the spatial dimension. Setting aside debates over whether drones *actually* fulfill the ethical claims made about them (which I have substantially reproduced here) downplays crucial ethical assessments against the standard *jus in bello* criteria of proportionality and discrimination. However, such assessments operate within the conventional spatial logic that I have argued drones transcend. Destabilizing the positive portrayal of drones through a critique of the absence of conscious spatial analysis does not undermine more conventional critiques. Hopefully, it augments and enhances them. The critical trend in political geography counsels us to question and challenge political spaces both concealed and revealed by conventional representations. The absence of a spatial dimension of just war theory means critical engagement with the distant intimacy of dronespace is necessary to uncover other ethically significant dimensions of the phenomenon. Thus my claims do not comprehensively reveal the spatial dimension of the ethics of drones or the insights to be gained through an explicit spatial dimension within just war theory.

Conclusion

Distant intimacy is a durable and expanding phenomenon. The number of targeted killings by the United States has declined since 2012, but the number of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679414000793 Published online by Cambridge University Press

governments investing in drone technologies and the capabilities of drones currently deployed by states (and nonstate actors) are expanding rapidly.[61] The integration of drones into wider intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) technologies and the growing autonomy of such systems are increasing the spatial challenge globally. I have argued that the established account of space within just war theory is ill-suited to the effective identification and assessment of the ethical challenges this form of violence represents. Space as a condition of the possibility of ethics is not neutral or natural, but constructed and highly political. Critical political geography offers useful tools for just war theory both to recognize and engage with the spatial dimension of drone strikes, helping reveal the nature and extent of the asymmetry of the ethical relationship between operators and their targets.

War has always been a technologically mediated activity, and the ability of modern ISR systems to reverse the previously settled relationship between increased distance and reduced intimacy in itself presents novel challenges, such as the effects it can have on the mental health of drone operators. What has not yet been so effectively understood, though, is how dronespace constructs the ethical subjectivity of targets in a way that simultaneously appears to hold out the promise of greater respect and protection for their rights through improved discrimination and proportionality, while simultaneously rendering them utterly, even uniquely, dependent for their subjectivity on the political, cultural, technological, and military perspective of those who hold them in their sights.

NOTES

[1] The term is also the title of a 2013 book by Joseph Epstein and Frederic Raphael, subtitled "A Friendship in the Age of the Internet." Their use is obviously dissimilar from mine.

[2] The term "drones" is disliked by many. Alternatives, such as Unmanned (or Uninhabited) Aerial Vehicles (or Systems), or Remotely Piloted Vehicles (or Systems) and a range of others have merits in that they better capture important aspects of these technologies. However, I use "drones" because the term is virtually ubiquitous.

[3] Drones have existed for almost a century, although operational deployment of armed drones only began during World War II, which also initiated their use for reconnaissance. Steven Zaloga, cited in Asa Kasher and Avery Plaw, "Distinguishing Drones: An Exchange," in Bradley Jay Strawser, ed., *Killing by Remote Control: The Ethics of an Unmanned Military* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 49.

[4] For example, Medea Benjamin, *Drone Warfare: Killing by Remote Control* (London: Verso, 2013); Congressional Research Service, *Rise of the Drones: Unmanned Systems and the Future of War* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Nimble Books, 2010); and Washington Post, *Permanent War: Rise of the Drones*, (New York, N.Y.: Diversion Books, 2013).

[5] Kasher and Plaw, "Distinguishing Drones," p. 49.

[6] E.g., Jürgen Altmann, "Arms Control for Armed Uninhabited Vehicles: An Ethical Issue," *Ethics and Information Technology* 15, no. 2 (2013), p. 140.

[7] For discussion of asymmetry of this sort, see Bradley Jay Strawser, "Moral Predators: The Duty to Employ Uninhabited Aerial Vehicles," *Journal of Military Ethics* 9, no. 4 (2010), pp. 355–61.

[8] Mark Coeckelbergh, "Drones, Information Technology, and Distance: Mapping the Moral Epistemology of Remote Fighting," *Ethics and Information Technology* 15, no. 2 (2013), p. 90.

[9] Jean L. Otto and Bryant J. Webber, "Mental Health Diagnoses and Counseling Among Pilots of Remotely Piloted Aircraft in the United States Air Force," *Medical Surveillance Monthly Report* 20, no. 3 (2013), pp. 3–8.
[10] Strawser, "Moral Predators."
[11] Kasher and Plaw, "Distinguishing Drones." The concept of an "enemy civilian" is oxymoronic within much just war theory, which seeks to define and defend the innocence of all civilians, irrespective of their citizenship or membership of a nonstate political community against which military action is being taken (Kasher's example is the use of drones by the Israeli government against Palestinian armed groups operating in densely populated urban environments). Civilians are not the "enemy." Kasher's account sees it as morally necessary for the Israeli state to deploy drones to protect military personnel at increased cost to Palestinians who have failed to respond to warnings to leave specified areas, or who allow an environment to persist in which Palestinian militants can plan or conduct operations against Israel, or who offer support to causes and practices espoused by Palestinian groups who advocate violence against Israel as part of their political program.
[12] Leo Kelion, "Empty F-16 jet tested by Boeing and US Air Force," *BBC News*, September 24, 2013, www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-24231077.
[13] Kasher and Plaw, "Distinguishing Drones," pp. 47–48.
[14] For a rejection of the force of this argument, see Strawser, "Moral Predators," pp. 358–60.
[15] For example, Strawser, "Moral Predators."
[16] For example, Avery Plaw, "Counting the Dead: The Proportionality of Predation in Pakistan," in Strawser, ed., *Killing by Remote Control*, pp. 126–53.
[17] For a critique, see Alison Williams, "Enabling Persistent Presence? Performing the Embodied Geopolitics of the Unmanned Aerial Vehicle Assemblage," *Political Geography* 30, no. 7 (2011), pp. 381–90.
[18] Coeckelbergh, "Drones," pp. 93–96.
[19] Strawser summarizes these claims well; see "Moral Predators," pp. 351–53. Discussion of the size of support teams is in Derek Gregory, "From a View to a Kill," *Theory, Culture & Society* 28, no. 7–8 (2011), pp. 193–95.
[20] Kyle Grayson, "Six Theses on Targeted Killing," *Politics* 32, no. 2 (2012), p. 121.
[21] Steve Niva, "Disappearing Violence: JSOC and the Pentagon's New Cartography of Networked Warfare," *Security Dialogue* 44, no. 3 (2013), pp. 186–87.
[22] For critiques of the reduced collateral damage claims of "networked warfare" operations, see Niva, "Disappearing Violence," pp. 191, 193; and Grayson, "Six Theses," pp. 125–26. For discussion of software systems used to model collateral damage consequences of different weapons systems, see Neta C. Crawford, "Bugsplat: US Standing Rules of Engagement, International Humanitarian Law, Military Necessity, and Noncombatant Immunity," in Anthony F. Lang, Jr., Cian O'Driscoll, and John Williams, eds., *Just War: Authority, Tradition, and Practice* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2013), pp. 231–50.
[23] Grayson, "Six Theses," p. 125.
[24] Coeckelbergh, "Drones."
[25] For example, Gregory, "From a View to a Kill," pp. 201–203.
[26] Coverage of drone operations aiming to quantify the extent of civilian casualties and the reasons for them, as well as the longer-term effects of drone strikes, are available from sources that include Bill Roggio and Alexander Mayer, "Charting the Data for US Airstrikes in Pakistan, 2004–2014" (undated), www.longwarjournal.org/pakistan-strikes.php; New America Foundation, "Drone Wars Pakistan: Analysis," securitydata.newamerica.net/drones/pakistan/analysis; Bureau of Investigative Journalism, "Covert Drone War," www.thebureauinvestigates.com/category/projects/drones/; and in reports such as "Living Under Drones: Death, Injury, and Trauma to Civilians From US Drone Practices in Pakistan," International Human Rights and Conflict Resolution Clinic (Stanford Law School) and Global Justice Clinic (NYU School of Law), September 2012, www.livingunderdrones.org/.
[27] Ben Emmerson, "Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms While Countering Terrorism," September 18, 2013, UN document A/68/389.
[28] Plaw, "Counting the Dead."
[29] For example, Emmerson, "Report of the Special Rapporteur."
[30] For example, Gearóid Ó Tuathail, *Critical Geopolitics: The Politics of Writing Global Space* (London: Routledge, 1996); and Marcus Power and David Campbell, "The State of Critical Geopolitics," *Political Geography* 29, no. 5 (2010), pp. 243–46.
[31] Derek Gregory, "The Everywhere War," *The Geographical Journal* 177, no. 3 (2011), p. 239.

[32] Stuart Elden, "Secure the Volume: Vertical Geopolitics and the Depth of Power," *Political Geography* 34, no. 1 (2013), pp. 35–51. Elden's work argues for the importance of the idea of "volume" as a concept that is better able to reveal the ways in which spatiality is constructed, maintained, and manipulated in a process of continual making and remaking by power holders. The ability of drones to define areas of land and to exercise control over them on the basis of terms set solely by drone operators is a good example of this phenomenon.
[33] Gregory, "The Everywhere War," p. 239.
[34] Ibid., pp. 245–47.
[35] Mary Ellen O'Connell, "Unlawful Killing With Combat Drones: A Case Study of Pakistan, 2004–2009," Notre Dame Law School Legal Studies Research Paper No. 09-43 (2010), pp. 13–21, papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id = 1501144.
[36] For example, Noam Lubell and Nathan Derejko, "A Global Battlefield? Drones and the Geographical Scope of Armed Conflict," *Journal of International Criminal Justice* 11, no. 1 (2013), pp. 65–88.
[37] Gregory, "The Everywhere War," p. 247.
[38] Grayson, "Six Theses," p. 122.
[39] Gregory, "The Everywhere War," p. 242.
[40] Niva, "Disappearing Violence," p. 196.
[41] Michael J. Boyle, "The Costs and Consequences of Drone Warfare," *International Affairs* 89, no. 1 (2013), pp. 1–29.
[42] Gregory, "The Everywhere War," pp. 240–42.
[43] Grayson, "Six Theses," pp. 124–25.
[44] Allison Williams, "Enabling Persistent Presence."
[45] For example, Noam Zohar, "Innocence and Complex Threats: Upholding the War Ethic and the Condemnation of Terrorism," *Ethics* 114, no. 4 (2004), pp. 734–51; Larry May, "Killing Naked Soldiers: Distinguishing between Combatants and Noncombatants," *Ethics & International Affairs* 19, no. 3 (2005), pp. 39–53; Jeff McMahan, "Just Cause for War," *Ethics & International Affairs* 19, no. 3 (2005), pp. 1–21; Uwe Steinhoff, "Killing Them Safely: Extreme Asymmetry and Its Discontents," in Strawser, ed., *Killing by Remote Control*, pp. 179–209.
[46] Michael Walzer, *Just And Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, 4th ed. (New York, N.Y.: Basic Books, 2006).
[47] Not that this has necessarily prevented people from attempting to surrender to drones. The best known example is of Iraqi forces in the 1991 Gulf War. In this case, surrendering to a drone was even more implausible as the operator was aboard the USS Wisconsin, several miles offshore, see www.navy.mil/navydata/fact_display.asp?cid=1100&tid=2100&ct=1.
[48] Strawser, "Moral Predators," pp. 355–58.
[49] Ibid., p. 357.
[50] Coeckelbergh, "Drones," pp. 94–96.
[51] Paul W. Kahn, "Imagining Warfare," *European Journal of International Law* 24, no. 1 (2013), pp. 218–21, 223–24.
[52] McMahan, "Just Cause for War"; Jeff McMahan, "On the Moral Equality of Combatants," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 14, no. 4 (2006), pp. 377–93.
[53] McMahan, "On the Moral Equality of Combatants."
[54] Strawser, "Moral Predators."
[55] Ian G. R. Shaw, "Predator Empire: The Geopolitics of US Drone Warfare," *Geopolitics* 18, no. 3 (2013), pp. 545–49.
[56] Shaw, "Predator Empire," pp. 543–45; Boyle, "Costs and Consequences," p. 21; and "Living Under Drones," International Human Rights and Conflict Resolution Clinic.
[57] Shaw, "Predator Empire."
[58] For example, Strawser, "Moral Predators."
[59] Coeckelbergh, "Drones," p. 95.
[60] For a critique, see Boyle, "Costs and Consequences."
[61] David Hastings Dunn, "Drones: Disembodied Aerial Warfare and the Unarticulated Threat," *International Affairs* 89, no. 5 (2013), pp. 1240–41.