Reading(1): https://www.philosophytalk.org/blog/ethics-drone-warfare

Laura Maguire

In the last six years alone, at least two and a half thousand people have been killed by US drone strikes.[[1]](https://www.philosophytalk.org/blog/ethics-drone-warfare" \l "_edn1" \o ") That’s nine times more drone attacks under Obama than under his predecessor, George W. Bush.

The justification for this **increase in attacks** is that drones are **precise, effective weapons that reduce unintended casualties**. Some might find the idea of a killing machine that can be operated from thousands of miles away deeply chilling. But the **defenders of drones say that cold and detached is good in war**. It means soldiers can be calm and dispassionate, and not act out of fear. They can take the time to hit the target, making sure there are no civilians around who could get killed.

how drones are actually used. While there’s **an argument to be made that using a weapon with the potential to reduce unintended casualties in a war is morally preferable to using another kind of weapon**, we should be more concerned with **what *actually* happens** in drone attacks, rather than what could *potentially* happen in some alternate universe.

First, to say that drones reduce unintended casualties is misleading, at best. While US soldiers may not be in direct danger when we drone attack Pakistan, Afghanistan, or wherever it is we’re terrorizing these days, hundreds upon hundreds of civilians have been killed by drones since Obama took office. It’s hard to see how that’s “**morally preferable.**”

A big part of the moral problem with drones is that **they make it too easy for the powers-that-be to bomb whomever they want without much political fallout**. Sending troops in on the ground and putting them in direct danger comes with political consequences, but if we attack our so-called “enemies” remotely, and don’t have soldiers coming back in body bags, then there’s not going to be nearly as much backlash. And so, politically speaking, it’s easy for commanders to order strikes, which then leads to a lot of civilian casualties on the other side.

Of course, the number of civilian casualties from drone attacks has more to do with foreign policy and intelligence gathering practices than the *technology* of drones *per se*. If avoiding civilian casualties is not a priority for the commander in charge of a strike, we’re going to see lots of civilian casualties, regardless of the kind of weapons used. We’re told that drone attacks target high value terrorists, when, in reality, it’s also farmers, low level drug dealers, and men exercising in “suspicious looking” compounds who are targeted.[[2]](https://www.philosophytalk.org/blog/ethics-drone-warfare" \l "_edn2" \o ")

It could be argued that using drones in war is still morally preferable to using other weapons, if you remove the problems that stem from poor intelligence and dubious policies. The question of whether a war is just or a target legitimate is not a question about drone technology. It’s a moral question that must be settled independently.

But *if* a war is just or a target legitimate, then isn’t using drones the best way to go because it will potentially have the lowest number of unintended casualties?

That’s a very big “if” when the technology itself makes going to war far too politically easy, which leads to us fighting all sorts of unjust wars. Of course, the reverse point could also be true—maybe there are wars we *should* be fighting but don’t when the possibility that we might incur high casualties means there’s a lack of political will to fight that war. Drones allow us to fight *more* wars for *just* causes. Because, you know, that’s definitely what we need more of in the world—war.

Any defense of drones, it seems to me, has to be based on some fantasy world, where politicians never lie, wars are always just, intelligence reliably identifies terrorists and only terrorists, and innocent civilians are never just “collateral damage.”

But we can’t talk about the ethics of drones without talking about how they are actually used in the real world.