

War without Virtue?

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1. Introduction

According to the homepage of the US Marine Corps, "The values that define a Marine are: Honor; Courage; and Commitment."¹ Of honor, we are told, "Marines are held to the highest standards, ethically and morally. Respect for others is essential. Marines are expected to act responsibly in a manner befitting the title they've earned." Of courage, "Courage is not the absence of fear. It is the ability to face fear and overcome it. It is the mental, moral, and physical strength ingrained in every Marine. It steadies them in times of stress, carries them through every challenge and aids them in facing new and unknown confrontations." The Marine Corps webpage also explains to page visitors—and potential recruits—that the US Marine Corps motto, *Semper Fidelis* (Latin for "always faithful") "... distinguishes the Marine Corps bond from any other. It goes beyond teamwork—it is a brotherhood and lasts for life." Finally, we are told that "becoming a Marine is a transformation that cannot be undone, and *Semper Fi* reminds us of that. Once made, a Marine will forever live by the ethics and values of the Corps."

As a number of authors have observed, these statements—and others like them, which may be found in the self-descriptions of many armed services around the world—set out a distinctive "role morality" for members of the armed services—a "warrior code."² The emphasis on the lasting transformation of character involved in becoming a Marine, alongside the list of the traits

¹ US Marine Corps, "Principles and Values." http://www.marines.com/main/index/making_marines/culture/traditions/core_values.

² Shannon E. French, *The Code of the Warrior: Exploring Warrior Values, Past and Present* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003); Renee Moelker and Peter Olsthoorn, "Virtue Ethics and Military Ethics," *Journal of Military Ethics* 6:4 (2007): 257–258; Peter Olsthoorn, *Military Ethics and Virtues: An Interdisciplinary Approach for the 21st Century* (London: Routledge, 2011); Bradley C. S. Watson, "The Western Ethical Tradition and the Morality of the Warrior," *Armed Forces and Society* 26:1 (1999): 55–72. For similar statements of sentiments as those contained on the Marine Corps webpage cited in note 1, see, for instance, the United States Army page, <http://www.army.mil/values/>; and the British Army page at <http://www.army.mod.uk/join/25736.aspx>.

that define a Marine, suggests that this code is best understood as a virtue ethics consisting in a list of "martial" or "warrior" virtues and an account of how they relate to each other.³ A "good warrior" is a person who cultivates and exercises these virtues.

There are, of course, grounds for cynicism about what any large organization says about its ethics. There is perhaps even more reason to be cautious about the claims that the military make about their ethics, given the extent to which the struggle to influence perceptions, both at home and overseas, has become an essential part of modern warfare. That power of ruling elites to defend their interests depends upon their ability to convince the poor to serve in their armies provides further reason for caution. It may well turn out that accounts of warrior virtues are essentially ideological, in that their primary role is to ensure that ordinary people continue to support the military rather than to accurately describe the motives and behavior of those who go to war. Nevertheless, even if this were the case, accounts of military virtue would continue to play an important role in mediating the relationship between the armed forces and the larger society. Indeed, ideas about warrior virtues could play this ideological role only if many people in the military themselves actually believe in them. To insist that ideas about martial virtue are largely ideological, then, would not be to deny that they play a real social role.

It seems likely, of course, that notions of martial virtue *do* play a real role in shaping behavior in modern military organizations as well as an ideological role in sustaining support for the military. While military life is often replete with rules and regulations, the military confronts as a profoundly practical dilemma two classical philosophical criticisms of rule-based systems for guiding action: the fact that every rule requires interpretation to be applied; and the fact that the application of complex sets of rules is often too time-consuming to be practical. Converting rules into actions therefore requires a faculty of judgment, the development of which in turn presupposes extensive practice. That is, it requires the cultivation and exercise of good habits. Shaping the character of service personnel is therefore the best way to promote the values encoded in military rules and regulations, including both military efficiency and ethical ideals.⁴

Yet recent developments in the nature of modern warfare seem to call into question the extent to which it is either necessary or possible for many combatants to cultivate or exercise "martial virtues." While long-range killing has been a feature of war since the invention of the spear and the sling, the advent of long-range teleoperated robotic systems such as the Predator and Reaper

³ Jamison Yi, "MCMAP and the Marine Warrior Ethos," *Military Review* 846 (2004): 17–24.

⁴ Reed R. Bonadonna, "Above and Beyond: Marines and Virtue Ethics," *Marine Corps Gazette* 78:1 (1994): 18–20.

drones fielded by the US arguably marks a significant quantitative—and perhaps even qualitative—change in the nature of military combat. Traditional conceptions of military virtue have typically relied on an account of the distinctive moral circumstances of “warriors” who are risking their lives for the sake of the political community. By transforming combat into a “desk job” that can be conducted from the safety of the home territory of advanced industrial powers without need for physical strength or martial valor, long-range robotic weapons call the relevance of such accounts into question. This chapter will therefore investigate the implications of these developments for conceptions of military virtue and for the future of the armed forces.

2. Remotely Piloted versus Autonomous Weapon Systems

Before I begin, I need to say a little bit more about the robotic technologies that pose the most dramatic challenge to the need for martial virtues. What are popularly understood as robot weapons are properly divided into two categories that raise different sets of ethical issues. Much of the popular and philosophical literature has focused on the prospects for—and ethics of—autonomous weapons systems (AWSs), which, as the appellation suggests, are systems that are capable of playing a role in combat without any human guidance. In reality, however, almost all of the “robotic” weapon systems that are being developed and deployed at the current moment require a human operator to make key decisions: they are remotely operated or unmanned military systems (UMS) rather than autonomous systems. These latter systems include unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) such as the Predator, Reaper, and Global Hawk, which have been used extensively in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as remote control submersibles, ships, tanks, trucks, and artillery pieces. They are robots insofar as they are unmanned (do not have a pilot onboard), typically possess some capacity for autonomous action (e.g., the Reaper is capable of flying between waypoints without a human operator), and, because the popular conception of robots does not distinguish clearly between autonomous systems and remote control machines.

The prospect of the development and deployment of *autonomous* weapons systems capable of wielding lethal force without the intervention of a human operator raises a distinctive set of ethical issues, concerning the extent to which they may lower the threshold of conflict, the responsibility for deaths caused by these systems, and the possibility that autonomous weapons may turn on those who have designed them, which I (and others) have dealt with elsewhere.⁵

⁵ See, for instance, Peter Asaro, “How Just Could a Robot War Be?” in Philip Brey, Adam Briggie and Katinka Waelbers (eds.), *Current Issues in Computing and Philosophy* (Amsterdam:

The presence of the human “in the loop” means that remotely operated systems do *not* raise the latter two issues: I have dealt with the implications of UMS for the threshold of conflict in a previous publication.⁶

My concern here, then, is with the ethics of remotely piloted vehicles (RPVs) or “unmanned” systems and their implications for the martial virtues. A number of contemporary dynamics suggest that such weapons are likely to play an increasingly important role in future wars. Foremost among these is the fact that the publics of many First World nations appear increasingly casualty shy—at least in the context of the wars of choice-rather-than-necessity that their governments have wanted to fight. Unmanned systems hold out the hope to governments that they may conduct military campaigns without risk of their citizens seeing their sons and daughters come home in body bags. In theory at least, by providing real-time video of the areas they survey, drones also allow lethal force to be used more precisely and with fewer civilian casualties, thus further reducing the risks of political backlash both domestically and internationally.⁷ Finally, many militaries are under budgetary pressure and unmanned systems are also generally held to be cheaper than the systems they replace.

These are all—roughly speaking—political virtues of UMS, but of course these systems also have a number of important military-strategic virtues that are driving their uptake. The relative cheapness of unmanned compared with manned systems is also an important consideration for military commanders, who must also hoard their resources during wartime. UMS greatly reduce the fog of war, which allows military operations to be coordinated more efficiently and force employed with greater precision. Robotic weapons—and drones in particular—greatly accelerate the tempo of battle, which in turn places pressure on rival militaries to adopt these systems to be able to operate at the necessary pace.⁸ Last—but by no means

IOS Press, 2008), 50–64; Gary E. Merchant et al., “International Governance of Autonomous Military Robots,” *Columbia Science and Technology Law Review* 12 (2011): 272–315; Noel Sharkey, “Cassandra or False Prophet of Doom: AI Robots and War,” *IEEE Intelligent Systems* 23:4 (2008): 14–17; Robert Sparrow, “Killer Robots,” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 24:1 (2007): 62–77; Robert Sparrow, “Robotic Weapons and the Future of War,” in Jessica Wolfendale and Paolo Tripodi (eds.), *New Wars and New Soldiers: Military Ethics in the Contemporary World* (Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2011), 117–133.

⁶ Robert Sparrow, “Predators or Plowshares? Arms Control of Robotic Weapons,” *IEEE Technology and Society* 28:1 (2009): 25–29.

⁷ As I have argued elsewhere (Sparrow, “Predators or Plowshares?”) these “virtues” of drones also make it more likely that governments will resort to violence. The assessment of the overall impact of the development and use of drones on levels of casualties, both civilian and military, is therefore more complex than first appears and must take account of casualties in incidents that would not have occurred were it not for the capacity drones provide for governments to wield force across national borders with little risk of casualties in their own armed services.

⁸ T. K. Adams, “Future Warfare and the Decline of Human Decisionmaking,” *Parameters: US Army War College Quarterly* (Winter 2001): 57–71.

least—unmanned systems can help keep warfighters out of “harm’s way” and therefore assist commanders both in husbanding the strength of their forces and in fulfilling their moral duty to—as much as is militarily possible—safeguard the lives of those under their command. For all these reasons, most commentators are predicting a greatly increased role for unmanned systems in the future of the armed services.⁹

3. Desk Jockey Warriors?

At first sight, at least, there is something profoundly disturbing about the idea of a war conducted by computer console operators, who are watching over and killing people thousands of kilometers away. In fact, it is harder than initially appears to justify this intuition, especially in the context of a realistic appreciation of the weapons that UMS such as the Predator replace. The argument that new weapons render war immoral by making it too easy to make the decision to take human life is hardly new. Indeed, it is at least as old as the crossbow—which was condemned for making it possible for peasants to kill armored knights—and perhaps even as old as the sling. In an age of long-range artillery, cruise missiles, and high-altitude bombing, it may appear perverse to single out remote control weapons for making possible “killing at a distance.” Many warfighters who fire weapons in the services of high-tech industrial powers now never set eyes on the people they intend to kill. Moreover, modern heavy weapons systems typically disperse responsibility for their effects amongst multiple parties: for instance, an artillery spotter calls in the target, a commander orders the attack, and a gunner fires the howitzer or cruise missile.

Yet there remains an element of risk in each of these activities: spotters may themselves be spotted and fired upon, bombers may crash or be shot down, commanders and artillery gunners may themselves be shelled or killed when weapons malfunction catastrophically. Long-range unmanned systems such as Predator and Reaper have succeeded in removing the operators from the theater of operations entirely, allowing them to “fight” wars in complete safety from the air-conditioned comfort of their command modules. The absence of risk to life and limb, the geographical distance between the operators and those they affect, and the technological dynamics driving the development of these systems call into question both the need for a number of important warrior virtues and the capacity of those whom we might call “desk jockey warriors” to exercise them. Most fundamentally, the operators of remotely operated weapons have no need

⁹ Peter W. Singer, *Wired for War: The Robotics Revolution and Conflict in the 21st Century* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009).

for courage and no opportunity to develop or exercise it. They may also, I will argue, have a reduced capacity to develop or exercise other important martial virtues.

4. The Martial Virtues

To assess the likelihood that the advent of remote control weaponry threatens to undermine or transform the martial virtues, we first need to have a better account of precisely what these virtues consist in and why they are important. A precise classification and full discussion of the martial virtues is beyond the scope of this chapter.¹⁰ Moreover, different armed services offer slightly different lists of virtues and emphasize different virtues even when they offer the same list. Nevertheless, a brief survey and discussion of a number of virtues, along with an understanding of why they are important, will be of considerable assistance in evaluating the challenge posed by the robotics revolution in warfare.

4.1 Courage

The first and most important martial virtue is courage.¹¹ To be capable of pursuing goals amidst the chaos of battle, a warrior must possess a “willingness to face fear and overcome it.” Discussions of courage typically note the importance of both *physical* and *moral* courage. Physical courage is the willingness to face fear of bodily discomfort, injury, and death. Moral courage is the willingness to face and overcome fear of the social and personal sanctions that may be incurred by doing what is right rather than what is popular, expected, or prudential.

The relationship between physical and moral courage is controversial. Peter Oolsthorn even argued that they are only weakly—if at all—correlated and that military training should be reoriented to emphasize moral rather than physical courage.¹² On the other hand, much military training proceeds as though there is a relationship between physical and moral courage and in the belief that the strength of will necessary to overcome physical challenges will

¹⁰ The most extensive discussion to date that I am aware of is provided in Oolsthorn, *Military Ethics and Virtues*. The first three virtues that I discuss each merit a whole chapter in Oolsthorn’s book.

¹¹ Hilliard Aronovitch, “Good Soldiers: A Traditional Approach,” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 18:1 (2001): 13–23, at 17.

¹² Peter Oolsthorn, “Courage in the Military: Physical and Moral,” *Journal of Military Ethics* 6:4 (2007): 270–279.

also assist individuals in confronting moral dangers.¹³ In part, I suspect this is because physical courage *can* be trained while it is unclear whether or not moral courage can be trained. More importantly, it is the nature of war that having the courage of one's convictions is not enough to guarantee success—the willingness of one party to resort to violence to settle a dispute requires the other to have the capacity to summon physical courage as well.¹⁴ Indeed, ultimately a warrior must be prepared to risk his (or her) life for the cause in which he (or she) fights.¹⁵ Someone who is paralyzed with fear at the thought of suffering or (even) his own death may find it impossible to summon moral courage when he most needs it. For this reason, I suspect that physical courage will remain at the heart of any viable “warrior code” for the foreseeable future.

4.2 Loyalty

Loyalty is the other virtue that is absolutely central to military service. In war—and in preparation for war—soldiers must be willing to place themselves at risk, indeed to sacrifice themselves, for the sake of the larger objectives of the unit, and ultimately the nation. As it will almost never be in the interests of individuals to risk their lives for the sake of the collective, both the nation and the military unit must appeal to motivations of their members other than their self-interest. The two main traits that the military relies on in this context are honor (which will be discussed in the next section) and loyalty. Loyalty involves a willingness to bear risks and make sacrifices for the sake of that to which one is loyal. In military contexts, this usually means a willingness to suffer physical hardships and even to risk death for the sake of the other members of a combat unit, and its commander, and much military training is dedicated to achieving the small group cohesion that generates such commitment.¹⁶ However, loyalty to larger institutions (e.g., “the Marines,” the “Commander in Chief,” the nation, or the constitution) and values (e.g., the traditions of the Corps, liberty, democracy) also plays a crucial role in promoting discipline, encouraging ethical behavior, and reducing the threat of military coups or other forms of social disorder that flow from military forces being willing to use or threaten violence outside of wartime.

¹³ Yi, “MCMAP and the Marine Warrior Ethos.”

¹⁴ Olsthoorn, “Courage in the Military,” 274.

¹⁵ Ryan R. Gorman, “War and the Virtues in Aquinas’s Ethical Thought,” *Journal of Military Ethics* 9:3 (2010): 257–258, at 254.

¹⁶ For some observations about how loyalty to one’s immediate comrades can promote both ethical and unethical behavior, see Steven M. Silver, “Ethics and Combat: Thoughts for Small Unit Leaders,” *Marine Corps Gazette* 90:11 (2006): 76–78.

4.3 Honor

Related to loyalty, but distinct from it, is the virtue of honor. A sense of honor is the concern for how well one lives up to one’s chosen ideals.¹⁷ Honor is vital insofar as it plays a crucial role in helping motivate warriors to risk life and limb for the sake of the cause in which they fight and in motivating them to live up to ethical ideals. In particular, a sense of honor plays a vital role in encouraging warfighters to abide by the principles of *jus in bello*. “Warriors” fight wars with honor and with the desire to test their skills against other warriors: they do not target civilians, and they use force only proportionate to their goals in discriminating fashion. A sense of honor also helps warfighters resist the various temptations to immoral behavior, such as looting and raping, to which they are likely to be exposed in war.¹⁸ Finally, insofar as ideas about what it means to be an honorable warrior provide intellectual and spiritual resources to reconcile a history of violence with a return to peace and social order, they may also assist with reintegrating returned servicemen into civilian life.¹⁹

Notoriously, honor is a social virtue. It is social in two senses. First, the dictates of honor are inevitably, to a certain extent at least, a function of the culture and understandings of social group. How a “good warrior” comports himself or herself is, to a large degree, determined by the example of role models and the behavior of peers. Thus, for instance, to be a good Marine is to live up to the traditions of the Marines.²⁰ Second, a sense of honor is reflexive in structure and involves a concern for the judgment of others, especially our peers.²¹ To gauge our own worth, we ask ourselves how we appear to others. To bolster our own resolve, we imagine how we will appear to others if we fail to live up to our standards. The virtue of (a sense of) honor consists in a large part, then, in being able to pick out the appropriate group of people whose opinions should matter to us. This in turn inevitably requires an evaluation of the activities and character of those around us, which itself will be partially determined by the appropriateness of their responses to our own activities. For this reason, a sense of the value of one’s own life and choices is also a prerequisite for a sense of honor. There is “no honor among thieves” both because

¹⁷ As Paul Robinson, “Magnanimity and Integrity as Military Virtues,” *Journal of Military Ethics* 6:4 (2007): 259–269, points out, strictly speaking, “honor” itself is not a virtue but, rather, what one acquires from exercising other virtues. A *sense* of honor, on the other hand, may constitute a virtue in an important range of cases.

¹⁸ Not only are these activities now understood to be evil in themselves, but they are also inimical to winning “hearts and minds” in counterinsurgency warfare and to maintaining domestic support for military campaigns in the context of modern media-saturated warfare.

¹⁹ French, *The Code of the Warrior*, 4–7, 10.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 15; Silver, “Ethics and Combat,” 76.

²¹ Peter Olsthoorn, “Honor as a Motive for Making Sacrifices,” *Journal of Military Ethics* 4:3 (2005): 183–197.

stealing from others is nothing to be proud of and because an honorable person does not allow his own sense of worth to be shaped by the opinions of those who steal.

4.4 Mercy

The final virtue I wish to mention is mercy.²² Mercy typically does *not* appear in the list of virtues on the webpages and in statements of the values of national armed services. Nevertheless, there are good reasons to think of mercy as an important virtue, the exercise of which is facilitated by military service and which plays a constitutive role in what it means to be a warrior.²³ To be merciful is to refrain, out of compassion, from killing or causing suffering when one is both able and would be justified in doing so. Those who have the power to kill therefore also have the opportunity to show mercy. Not all warriors are merciful, but those who are play a crucial role in showing how the warrior's code is indeed an *ethical* code and not merely a tradition. The cultivation and demonstration of mercy is one of the main things that distinguish warriors from mere "killers." In showing mercy, warriors demonstrate their respect for human life even in the midst of war.²⁴

While the idea that combat is an arena that makes mercy possible is a familiar one, for many people there will be an element of cognitive dissonance in thinking of warriors as having a merciful *character*. Rather, we typically think of warriors as being trained to *overcome* their sympathetic impulses to be capable of killing in the pursuit of victory. This dissonance should disappear when we remember that a "warrior code" defines a "role morality" and that the form and place of particular virtues in an ethical life may be different in different roles. Mercy in a warrior will take a different form to mercy in a doctor but is possible nevertheless.

5. Virtues as Character Traits

It is worth emphasizing that all of these virtues consist in more than simply a disposition to act in the way that is most obviously associated with the virtue.

²² To write of mercy as a virtue is slightly clumsy. However, the more grammatically correct "mercifulness" is even clumsier.

²³ One place where ideas about mercy do clearly play a key role in determining what it means to be a warrior is in regards to expectations concerning the treatment of prisoners of war. My thanks to Catherine Mills for drawing this to my attention.

²⁴ As French, *Code of the Warrior*, demonstrates, the content of "warrior codes" has differed across history and cultures—and not every warrior code has valued mercy in the way I have described here. Nevertheless, the idea that warriors kill only reluctantly—and consequently value mercy—is, I would submit, central to the warrior codes of modern militaries that understand war within the framework of just war theory, which insists that we should fight wars only reluctantly and—even then—subject to constraints determined by the need to minimize the concomitant loss of human life.

Virtuous actions flow from the character of an agent, and that character consists in a larger set of dispositions to behave in accordance with the particular virtue.²⁵ Thus, for instance, persons who possess the virtue of courage will not only overcome their fear but will also do so in a certain spirit, in a manner appropriately sensitive to context, and (arguably) only in a just cause; they will also respond to other acts of courage and cowardice and to courageous and cowardly people in particular ways. This will be important to the argument that follows because, while it may be possible for the operators of remotely piloted weapons to act in ways that would appear to be in accordance with various virtues, it is less clear whether they can develop the larger set of dispositions that are necessary for them to have a virtuous character.

6. Desk Jockey Warrior Virtues?

Armed with this brief discussion of a number of important martial virtues and a sense of why they are important, we are now in a better position to evaluate the impact of the advent of remotely piloted and robotic weaponry. I will discuss each of these virtues in turn and argue that the advent of remote control warfare poses a significant threat to the relevant virtue. Because an obvious question in any discussion of the ethical implications of UMS is the extent to which alleged impacts are actually unique to these systems, I will also offer some observations on this matter in each case.

6.1 Courage

Most obviously, UMS operations call into question the need for courage by those who operate them. Courage, understood as "the ability to face fear and overcome it," requires cause for fear for its exercise. Yet long-range UMS pilots control these systems from thousands of kilometers away, beyond the reach of enemy action. They will not be killed or injured if the systems they are operating crash or if the weapons they are firing explode. They are, in fact, completely safe and consequently have no cause for fear—or need for courage. Indeed, there is no need for operators to be physically fit or even able-bodied, as long as they are able to operate the controls of the weapon.

It might be argued that a form of courage is still necessary to be able to pilot UMS: moral courage. Pilots of these systems must be willing to make life-or-death decisions, including the decision to kill another person, in circumstances where making the wrong decision may lead to the death of other warfighters. Thus, piloting drones is not for the fainthearted.

²⁵ Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 10–12.

The problem with this line of argument is that it fails to distinguish UMS operators from ambulance drivers, pharmacists, surgeons, paramedics, police, and rescue workers. Members of these professions must also make life-or-death decisions, and thus working in these roles also involves moral courage. Indeed, given that members of these professions will be physically present in situations where people may die as a result of their choices, they arguably require *more* courage than UMS operators.

In response, it might be claimed that while all these roles do involve life-or-death decisions, they do not involve the deliberate decision to kill, which UMS operators must be willing to make. This is true, as far as it goes, although one would also note that police officers are occasionally required to make the decision to use lethal force and that members of these other professions are occasionally required to make a deliberate decision to sacrifice—if not directly kill—the lives of one or more people to save others. However, the idea that the decision to kill requires moral courage relies crucially upon a folk-psychological account of the nature and psychological consequences of killing that in turn relies upon the idea that the person who kills and the person who is killed are physically present to each other. Indeed, the common intuition that there is something morally suspect about long-range or remote control killing arises precisely because of a concern that the geographic and psychological distance between killer and killed makes killing too easy. That is, the idea that it takes moral courage to fire a missile at—and kill—someone who one has seen as only pixels on a screen is precisely what is under dispute in debate about the morality of killing via UMS.²⁶

Unless it can be shown that UMS operators are typically reluctant to kill and fear the moral and psychological implications of doing so, the argument that it requires moral courage to operate the systems will be unconvincing. What little, largely anecdotal, evidence I have been able to gather from the literature is ambiguous on this question. Reports of posttraumatic stress disorder among the pilots of Predator and Reaper UAVs suggest that the decision to kill via these systems may exact a high personal toll and therefore properly requires moral courage.²⁷ On the other hand, I have seen reports that those who fly these UAVs are typically eager to attack targets, that they are excited when they do so, and that a key task in training the pilots of Predator and Reaper is reminding them that they are “killing people” and not just “shooting electrons”—suggesting that little moral courage is required to make the decision to fire.²⁸

²⁶ For useful discussions, see David Whetham, “Remote Killing and Drive-By Wars,” in David Lovell and Igor Primoratz (eds.), *Protecting Civilians during Armed Conflict: Theoretical and Practical Issues during Violent Conflict* (Ashgate, 2012); Jeff Sparrow, *Killing: Misadventures in Violence* (Carlton: Melbourne University Publishing, 2009).

²⁷ See, for instance, Singer, *Wired for War*, 346–347.

²⁸ See, for instance, Bryan Bender, “Attacking Iraq, from a Nev. Computer,” *Boston Globe* April 3, 2005, A6; Noah Shachtman, “Drone School, a Ground’s-Eye View,” *Wired Magazine*, May 27, 2005. <http://www.wired.com/science/discoveries/news/2005/05/67655>.

One thing this discussion does reveal, however, is that to the extent that we are concerned with moral courage, then the operators of (some) remotely piloted weapon systems may require more of it than operators of other weapons that facilitate killing at a distance. UMS typically provide their operators with much *more* information about the battle space and the fate of those they fire upon than more familiar long-range weapons such as artillery, cruise missiles, and aerial bombardment.²⁹ The suggestion that it takes little moral courage to kill at a distance using UMS will therefore apply much more generally in modern warfare.

There is another set of circumstances that may require moral courage of UMS operators, which is when they receive an order that is immoral or illegal. For instance, a pilot may pay a high personal price for refusing to fire, when ordered to do so, on a target he or she believes is a civilian rather than a military target. Refusing such an order will therefore require the ability to overcome fear of the institutional sanctions that may result, which in a military context may include imprisonment.

Yet the operators of UMS are arguably much less likely to be called upon to execute illegal orders than are combatants in the field and are much better placed to resist them, both institutionally and psychologically. Because the telemetry from these systems and communication networks that support their operations is typically recorded, commanders are likely to be much more cautious about issuing illegal orders. For the same reason, operators can be confident that their behavior, and any reasons they provide for it will be documented if the matter comes to trial.³⁰ The operators of UMS are also much less likely to be influenced by terror or hatred or other strong emotions that may grip combatants who are under threat or in the midst of combat and that make it harder for combatants to find their moral compass when ordered to participate in war crimes. Finally, as I discuss later, the demands of loyalty are much weaker on UMS operators than on combatants physically located in the theater of operations, so they are also much better placed to resist peer pressure to carry out immoral acts.

The operators of UMS therefore have no need for physical courage and arguably have little need for moral courage. Indeed, they have no opportunity to exercise physical courage and arguably greatly reduced opportunities for moral courage. While the argument that they have little need (or opportunity) for moral courage may apply more generally to long-range killing in modern warfare, the argument that they have no need (and have no opportunity to demonstrate) for physical courage seems *almost* uniquely applicable to these new weapons systems.³¹

²⁹ For further discussion of the implications of fact, see Robert Sparrow, “Building a Better WarBot: Ethical issues in the design of unmanned systems for military applications,” *Science and Engineering Ethics* 15:2 (2009): 169–187.

³⁰ Whetham, “Remote Killing and Drive-By Wars.”

³¹ I say “almost” because ever since the invention of the telegraph there have been small numbers of people directly involved in war who have been beyond the reach of enemy action.

6.2 Loyalty

The operations of remotely piloted weapons also pose a significant challenge to loyalty. As I noted already, what is required in traditional military service is loyalty to the members of a small combat unit as well as to the larger institutions of which they are a part. Operators of UMS may train and work alongside others, but they do not *fight* alongside them. Indeed, it is questionable whether they are ever in combat at all. As a result, they have little need for loyalty to their comrades, a greatly reduced capacity to demonstrate it, and little opportunity to develop and cultivate it.

Operators have little need for loyalty from their comrades because they are in no danger. Soldiers on the battlefield require loyalty from those alongside whom they fight because without such loyalty it is not reasonable to expect them to risk their lives for each other or for the military objectives of the group. Being safely located thousands of kilometers from the enemy, operators of UMS can carry out their duties without needing to worry about being let down by their comrades.

Interestingly, this argument about the reduced need for loyalty among the operators of UMS is *more* forceful than in the case of many of the other means of long-range killing with which they are often compared. Even the crews of B-52s bombing from out of the range of enemy anti-aircraft defenses or gunners firing cruise missiles from a battleship hundreds of kilometers away from their targets rely upon the dedication and service of other members of the armed services, without whose diligence their own lives would be at risk from the weapons they employ. UMS operators face no such risks.

That the operators of UMS have a reduced capacity to demonstrate loyalty is more controversial but still seems to be the case. Loyalty requires the willingness to bear risks and to make sacrifices, yet UMS operators bear no risks and have a greatly reduced capacity for sacrifice in the course of their duties. They may, of course, work hard and diligently for long hours, but this seems hardly comparable to the sacrifices that soldiers may make for each other on the battlefield. Even if a Predator drone comes to the rescue of others by destroying an enemy who was threatening troops on the battlefield just in the nick of time, the operators will have shown no bravery and undergone little hardship. It is difficult to see what operators could do that *would* demonstrate loyalty.

If the pilots of remotely operated weapon systems struggle to demonstrate loyalty, then it follows that it will be difficult for them to develop and cultivate it, as virtues must be sustained through regular exercise. Another reason to think that UMS make the development of loyalty more difficult is the fact that those involved in the operations are scattered around the globe. The pilots who fly them are often on a different continent from those who launch, refuel, and

maintain them. More importantly, the pilots may never meet or even speak to the people "alongside" whom they fight. Admittedly, war often involves fleeting cooperation between strangers in different services or even in the armed forces of different nations. Air support and indirect fire support often involve people fighting the same battle for many days without ever having the chance to meet. This latter dynamic is therefore hardly new. Nevertheless, the operations of UMS do seem to represent its apogee to date.

Of course, UMS operators may still demonstrate loyalty to the *institutions* within which they serve, with which they *will* have extended relationships. Again, though, we might wonder whether the reduced opportunities they have to make sacrifices impacts on the capacity to demonstrate loyalty. Trying hard to achieve set objectives, working long hours, or declining "better offers" from other potential employers out of loyalty to their particular armed service will not distinguish UMS operators from civilian workers. There is nothing distinctively "martial" about loyalty of this sort.

The absence of risk and the geographic separation between UMS operators and the theater of operations are therefore also a serious threat to the martial virtue of "loyalty." While UMS are not alone, among the technologies of modern warfare, in making loyalty less important and less likely to develop, the near-total absence of risk involved in the operations of long-range UMS does pose a distinct challenge to the need for loyalty.

6.3 Honor

It is clearly possible for UMS operators to be better or worse warfighters, both in a technical and an ethical sense. They were awarded decorations for airmanship when they demonstrated technical proficiency. It is also possible for them to operate these systems in ways that are more in accordance with or less in accordance with the principles of *jus in bello* and thus to aspire to behave in an ethically exemplary fashion. The operation of UMS is often difficult and—insofar as these weapons contribute to military victory, help preserve the lives of friendly warfighters, and reduce civilian casualties—worthwhile. These considerations suggest that operations involving UMS contain all the ingredients necessary for their operators to maintain a sense of honor.

There are, moreover, some reasons to think that UMS operators are more likely to behave ethically in "combat" than combatants located in the theater of operations. Fear of death or injury in battle can contribute to combatants violating the requirements of *jus in bello*. Since UMS operators have nothing to fear from their enemies, they are better placed to be able to pause and consider the consequences of their actions. The mediated nature of the relationship with events in the theater of operations also means that they are less likely to be

gripped by other strong emotions—such as anger, aggression, or hatred—that may make it more difficult to think about and do what is right.

Nevertheless, there are three important challenges to the cultivation and exercise of the sense of honor by desk jockey warriors.

First—the flip side of the previous observations—if UMS operators face fewer challenges to acting ethically, they may have less reason to cultivate a sense of honor. I will discuss the possibility that this simply demonstrates that we should be prepared to trade honor for the use of weapons that produce better outcomes. For the moment, I simply want to note the tension between the claim that UMS operators are better placed to act ethically and the claim that they fight with honor. They may lack an honorable *character* even if particular actions meet a high ethical standard.

Second, the mediated nature of the relationship between the operators and those they kill may make it more difficult for them to respect—and to earn respect from—those against whom they fight and those who may kill. They may never set foot in the country in which they “fight” or meet any of the people against whom they fight. In the absence of any human relations with those who their actions will affect, warfighters may be less inclined to resist impulses arising out of fear, hatred, or anger where these emotions *do* arise.

Contra the previous claim, then, this would suggest that there may be a *greater* need for honor among those who pilot remotely operated weapons. Unfortunately, UMS pilots are alienated from two groups of people who should properly be an important resource for the development and maintenance of a sense of honor: enemy warriors and civilians in the territory where war is being fought. I noted already that honor is a social virtue with a reflexive structure. The first community to which warriors look to determine the standards to which they should adhere to and how well they are doing so is their immediate comrades. Yet “honor” that is affirmed only by one’s comrades is always going to be fragile, especially if one’s comrades are also engaged in the same behavior, the honor of which has come into question. Moreover, the “peers” of warriors would typically include enemy warriors—even if the assessment of the enemy is more often imagined than actually ascertained. UMS pilots will never meet their enemies, and it is hard to imagine their targets offering them respect for the honor with which they fight. When warriors look beyond their peers for evaluation of their activities, one place they would be well advised to look is the population among whom they fight, who, one would hope, might admire their commitment or value the care they take to avoid civilian casualties. UMS pilots are denied access to this resource as well. Once more, of course, these problems are not confined to UMS but will arise with any long-range weapon fired from outside of the territory in which war is taking place.

However, third, the more fundamental challenge that UMS pose to the sense of honor arises out of the thought that there is something inherently

dishonorable about killing people one is observing on a video screen from thousands of kilometers away and who have no opportunity to return fire. The absence of danger to the operator, as well as the power of the sensors and weapons they command, seems to make killing too easy to be called honorable.

This is, I think, a widespread and powerful intuition, but it turns out to be remarkably hard to unpack. In particular, we need to be careful to avoid relying on an argument about chivalry here. War is not a game, and there is no reason that it should be fair. Indeed, there is some reason to believe that if a war is worth fighting—if one believes that one is fighting in a just cause—then it would be best if it were over quickly with as few losses on one’s own side as possible. Certainly, there is a moral obligation on commanders to try to preserve, as much as is compatible with achieving military objectives, the lives of the troops under their command. Ensuring a (favorable) asymmetry of forces whenever their troops go into battle is one of the best ways to meet this obligation. In this context, UMS look like ideal weapons.³² At the very least, they are no more or less “fair” than cruise missiles or high-altitude bombing.

On the other hand, the principles of *jus in bello* already place restrictions on the way wars may be fought, including those that prolong wars and make particular military victories harder to achieve. Nerve gases and dum-dum bullets are each useful weapons in some circumstances, but their use is nevertheless prohibited by the law of armed conflict. Firebombing the residential suburbs of cities might hasten an enemy surrender but would violate the requirement for discrimination in *jus in bello*. Roughly speaking, these sorts of prohibitions are justified by the belief that even though these weapons or strategies might be justified in some particular cases, the overall consequences of their use—or of allowing the ethics of their use to be assessed on a case-by-case basis—outweigh their military virtues.

My suspicion is that our intuitions about the honor of the use of UMS have a similar structure. That is, they arise from—and draw attention to—a concern that disassociating physical courage from a war would be disastrous in the long term. As long as courage is required to go into battle, then warriors will fight for causes only that (they believe) are worth fighting for. There is, of course, no guarantee that the causes that warriors think are worth fighting for are in fact worth going to war for: history is full of examples where, with the benefit of hindsight, we wonder why people ever cared so much about a pretext for war that they were prepared to kill or die for it. How many more wars would have been waged, though, if those who fought in them did not require courage to participate?

³² An argument made forcefully in Bradley Jay Strawser, “Moral Predators: The Duty to Employ Uninhabited Aerial Vehicles,” *Journal of Military Ethics* 9:4 (2010): 342–368.

Because *any* asymmetry will reduce the risks to warriors on the side with the superior forces and because of the obligation on commanders to protect their troops, I do not think this line of argument can serve to show that the use of unmanned systems is unethical *simpliciter*. Indeed, it may be ethically required to achieve maximum military advantage over an enemy in combat even though the result may be that there is little honor in any victory achieved. Moreover, the suggestion that the use of UMS lacks honor will generalize to other means of effectively risk-free killing that are now prevalent in modern warfare. Nevertheless, insofar as UMS represent the apogee to date of a logic of risk-free warfare and have become perilously close to achieving it, it is entirely appropriate that concerns about this logic should attach most forcefully to these systems.³³

The implications of UMS for the extent to which those who operate them can plausibly maintain a sense of honor are complex and difficult to resolve. There is I think much more work, both philosophical and empirical, to be done on this topic. My initial investigations suggest, though, that the operations of UMS also pose a substantial challenge to this important martial virtue.

6.4 Mercy

Along with their power to kill, operators of remote weapon systems also have the option not to exercise this power even when they would be justified in doing so. At first sight it would appear, then, that there will still be a role for mercy in the character of those who operate UMS.

Yet again, there are reasons to be concerned that the exercise and cultivation of mercy may be threatened by UMS.

To begin with, the organizational and institutional context in which the operators of UMS “fight” arguably makes it harder for them to exercise discretion. Since the operators are not in any danger, it is more plausible to expect them to follow orders from other people who may be geographically distant and also to wait for orders to follow. The long loiter time and extensive reach of these systems also allow more opportunity for multiple parties to have input

³³ Strawser, “Moral Predators,” criticizes this line of argument for implying that states should renounce any weapons that generate significant asymmetry of forces and as resting on unreliable judgments about future states of affairs. However, Strawser here confuses the ethics of unilateral disarmament with the ethics of arms control more generally. The fact that the widespread deployment of a particular class of weapons would lower the threshold of conflict is a traditional ground for arms control, and there is nothing especially controversial or difficult about the assessments of probability involved in judging that a given class of weapons does so. Moreover, we could be justified in pursuing arms control of new weapons even if existing weapons produce a similar or greater risk of war simply because it may be more plausible to establish an arms control regime for new weapons as they are developed and become controversial than it is to demand that states renounce their existing arsenals.

into decisions about what and when to attack.³⁴ Indeed, targeting “by committee” has increasingly become possible even for mobile targets now that drones can provide nearly continuous surveillance over a large territory.³⁵ If the role of UMS operators is merely to execute decisions made by others, then they may have little opportunity to show mercy.

However, there is a more fundamental challenge to the idea that mercy can play a role in the operations of UMS, owing to the geographic distance between the operators and the people whose lives they take or spare and the mediated nature of their engagement with them. Not every refusal to kill is plausibly described as an act of mercy, let alone as flowing from the virtue of being merciful. Virtue involves action for the right motives. In the case of mercy, it requires action motivated by compassion. Compassion is most fundamentally a response to the needs of the concrete other—to a particular person in a particular time and place. For instance, when a soldier refrains from killing an enemy because he or she sees a terror in the enemy’s eyes, it may be an act of mercy (when such an action is consistent with and flows from the character of the soldier).

Yet we might wonder whether the sensor systems that guide the operations of UMS are capable of communicating the moral reality necessary to ground compassion. This concern may take two forms, which are easier or harder to assuage. It might be argued that current sensing technologies are incapable of transmitting enough of the humanity of their targets to allow genuine mercy but conceded that future sensors might overcome this limit. A more radical critique, though, would deny that *any* remote sensing system or spy camera is capable of communicating the *moral* reality of people half a world away. That is, even if UMS operators have access to images of the quality that one might have a mere meter away from someone, the relation between them and the person whose life they were sparing would not be capable of sustaining genuine compassion. This latter critique would rest on a thesis in media ethics about the moral difference between representation and reality, which seems plausible to me but which I am unable to defend, for reasons of space, here.³⁶

³⁴ Singer, *Wired for War*, 348–353.

³⁵ Note that these effects of UMS also partially extend to include the operations of other combatants. Quite early in the debate about the impact of UAVs on military operations, a number of commentators drew attention to the way these systems posed a threat to the autonomy of battlefield commanders by making it possible for distant officers—or even for the civilian leadership—to exercise control over operations in real time. See, for instance, Jeffrey A. Harley, “Information, Technology, and Center of Gravity,” *Naval War College Review* 50:1 (1997): 66–87, at 83–84; John A. Gentry, “Doomed to Fail: America’s Blind Faith in Military Technology,” *Parameters: US Army War College Quarterly* (Winter 2002): 88–103, at 100; Noah Shachtman, “Attack of the Drones,” *Wired Magazine* 13:6 (2005). http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/13.06/drones_pr.html.

³⁶ For an early defense of this claim, see Jerry Mander, *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* (New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1978).

Once more, we must be mindful of a comparison with other forms of long-range killing. Those who fly bombers or fire cruise missiles or long-range artillery may never meet the people against whom they fight. Any compassion they have for their enemies must necessarily be abstract, which will also rule out genuine acts of mercy. There may, however, be a subtler and insidious threat to mercy involved in the operations of UMS arising from the inability to demonstrate mercy in circumstances where it would normally be appropriate. Unlike those who drop bombs from a great height, the operators of UMS may be able to watch terrified and helpless individuals being killed and maimed by the weapons they have unleashed. Yet even if they choose not to fire out of concern for the welfare of those they are surveying, their relation to their targets may be too abstract for this choice to count as merciful. Over time, this lack of opportunity to show mercy where it might otherwise be appropriate may contribute to a hardening of the heart among the operators and eventually to the development of the vice associated with a *deficiency* of mercy—callousness.

We don't typically think of mercy as a martial virtue. Yet, as I have argued, mercy plays an important role in distinguishing modern warriors from mere killers. The geographical and psychological distance between UMS operators and their targets suggests that it may be extremely difficult for the pilots of remotely operated weapons to demonstrate this important virtue.

7. The Future of the Martial Virtues

I have suggested here that the development and deployment of remotely operated weapon systems constitute a serious threat to current notions of martial virtue. However, the ultimate import of these findings, it might be argued, depends on the impact of robotic weapons on how wars are fought in the future and also on the response of the armed services to the challenges posed by remotely piloted operations.

7.1 Robotic Weapons and the Future of War

One good reason for downplaying the significance of this threat to martial virtues is cynicism about the extent to which future wars will in fact be fought remotely. Remotely operated weapons have undoubted utility in many roles and for this reason are likely to be continued to be deployed at an ever increasing intensity of operations. However, the idea that it will ever be possible to (successfully) fight a war without placing warfighters in roles that require traditional martial virtues looks to be a fantasy for at least two reasons.

First, the utility of remotely piloted weapons is heavily dependent on the technological capacities of their adversaries. To date, drones and their ilk have

overwhelmingly been deployed in asymmetric conflicts against adversaries without robust anti-aircraft (or antisubmarine) systems, with limited capacity to deploy electronic countermeasures or conduct cyber warfare, and certainly without the ability to launch kinetic attacks on the satellite and other communications infrastructure on which they depend. It remains to be seen how survivable and effective robotic weapons will be in combat with a technologically advanced adversary. For this reason, it would be extremely unwise for any nation to let its capacity to field a traditional (manned) military force decline too precipitously, let alone to commit to an entirely unmanned military.

Second, in asymmetrical wars of the sort currently being fought by the US in Afghanistan and North Africa, which are widely predicted to constitute a large percentage of future conflicts, victory will usually turn on achieving one of two objectives to which robotic weapons can make limited contributions. Accomplishing a lasting political settlement of the dispute that was the cause for war either requires directly controlling—traditionally, by occupation—activities in a territory or installing a friendly government. Occupying territory will require putting “boots on the ground.” Achieving the influence required to install a friendly government will almost always involve cultivating sufficient political support among the civilian population by winning “hearts and minds,” which is also likely to require a more robust engagement—both civilian and military—than UMS allow.

For these reasons it seems likely, that, for the foreseeable future, most wars will involve combat operations conducted by soldiers physically located in the theater of operations. However, if this is the case, then it may seem as though we have little reason to worry that the traditional military virtues will be undermined or transformed by the operations of UMS.

Yet the belief that the martial virtues will remain necessary is compatible with the argument that unmanned operations pose a profound threat to the martial virtues—indeed, it only makes the latter more pressing. The worry is not that the need for the martial virtues will disappear or even that the virtues themselves will not be realized by warriors when wars are fought but rather that the operations of UMS are inimical to these virtues so that when they *are* required they will be lacking.

Moreover, the political and military-strategic dynamics driving the uptake of UMS suggest that the threat to the martial virtues may be more pronounced than first appears. UMS are already the weapon of choice for governments seeking to prosecute wars in the face of concerns about domestic political opposition should friendly or civilian casualties occur. The expectations of risk-free war that these weapons encourage may eventually effectively force their use in an increasing number of roles. Thus, even if the martial virtues are threatened only among UMS operators, this will be a significant concern if this group comes to constitute an increasing proportion of those who see active service.

But it may also be difficult to confine the cultural impact of the operations of UMS to the operators themselves. The more the militaries of industrial societies¹ aspire to risk-free warfare, the harder it may be to convince those in the armed services that they should aspire to the martial virtues.

7.2 Military Training and the Future of the Virtues

Most of the professional life of members of the armed services is not spent in combat. Similarly, combat operations are not the only place where virtues are learned or exercised or even the only place where they are necessary. Thus, perhaps even if particular martial virtues are no longer needed—or developed—in the operations of UMS, they may still be maintained in military culture and inculcated through training or in the day-to-day routines of those who operate them.

However, training to inculcate virtues that warriors are unlikely ever to be able to exercise is an uneasy compromise. Combat operations are the core function of the armed services—their *raison d'être*. Training exercises or military routines that do not contribute to combat effectiveness are likely to erode over time because it will be difficult to justify their presence. At best then, this approach might serve as a temporary stopgap to preserve the martial virtues from the implications of UMS in the short term.

8. Conclusion: War without Virtue?

It has not been my purpose here to determine whether the use of UMS is ethical or unethical. I have undertaken the smaller—but related—task of examining the impact of these weapons on the martial virtues. I have argued that the operations of UMS pose a significant risk to the place of the martial virtues within the organizational culture of the armed services and to current understandings of the ethics of war. For those who care about the future shape of armed conflict, this should be a disturbing prospect. Indeed, although I have not attempted it here, it may be that a longer and more ambitious argument could be made that the threat posed to the martial virtues by UMS gives us reason to reconsider current enthusiasm for them.

There would, admittedly, seem to be something paradoxical—if not downright implausible—in arguing that the fact that a class of powerful and effective weapons reduces the need for military virtues gives us any reason to refrain from employing them. If unmanned systems will save both friendly combatant and civilian lives (due to their capacity to allow more precise use of force), then so much the worse for the virtues. Soldiers may be more than happy to give up the martial virtues if doing so means they don't get their legs blown off

by an improvised explosive device in a foreign country. Civilians in the area where the conflict is taking place may also prefer that industrious technicians use UMS rather than have warriors use the more destructive or less accurate manned systems that would otherwise serve in their place.³⁷

There is some force in this thought. One certainly cannot rule out a priori the possibility that the evils of war would be reduced by trading the martial virtues for better weaponry. However, in closing, I will observe that we should be very cautious about giving up on the warrior virtues. As noted already, it is doubtful that wars will ever be fought entirely by weaponry that eliminates the need for the traditional martial virtues. However, perhaps more importantly, the traditions and ethics of the armed services, which have established their various “warrior codes,” have developed and evolved over many years and through many conflicts. While war remains a ghastly business, where they are maintained, warrior codes function to reduce the horror of war and tame the worst excesses of young men sent out to kill strangers in foreign lands with weapons of terrifying power. Before we abandon the traditional martial virtues we would need to be very confident that whatever was likely to replace them would serve equally well in this demanding task. Given the powerful dynamics currently driving the development and deployment of UMS, it may be that this is a dangerous experiment that that we are about undertake.³⁸

³⁷ See, for instance, the sentiments quoted in the penultimate paragraph of Pir Zubair Shah, “My Drone Wars,” *Foreign Policy* March–April (2012). http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/02/27/my_drone_war?page=full.

³⁸ My thanks to Catherine Mills, Jim Sparrow, Dirk Baltzly, and Bradley Strawser, all of whom read and commented on versions of this paper.