



The Drone Operator and Identity: Exploring the Construction of Ethical Subjectivity in Drone Discourses

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Critical Approaches to Discourse Analysis across Disciplines
www.cadaadjournal.com
Vol 9 (2): 62 – 78

PETER LEE

University of Portsmouth
peter.lee@port.ac.uk

Abstract

Discourses on lethal drone operations in the twenty-first century have commonly focused on the physical effects of drone strikes – usually by the CIA – on populations and individuals, and on associated disputes over the legitimacy of such actions. Until now, the secrecy surrounding drone programmes has excluded the perspective of serving military drone operators from public and academic debate. Drawing on both public discourse and interviews with Royal Air Force Reaper drone personnel, this paper explores two ways in which the identity of the drone operator is formed and self-created. Identity formed through other-representation in public discourse is contrasted with elements of identity as practice in the operators' own discourse. Foucault identified the objectivizing of the subject as a means by which an individual's identity is constituted in discourse, while also highlighting technologies of the self that are used when the individual's identity is self-created (Foucault and Rabinow 1997: 224-5). Further, Foucault's self-forming ethical subject emerges in two ontologically distinct but entwined trajectories: first, in relation to socially or culturally accepted rules, laws, prohibitions and interdictions, which he calls the moral code; and second, through practices of the self (1984: 5, 25). Drawing on Foucault, this paper provides new insight into the actions and identities of British Reaper drone operators, recognizing the previously-unseen, complex and creative ethical dynamics at work in individuals who routinely take decisions and actions that have life or death consequences.

Key words: drones, Foucault, ethics, subjectivity, technologies

1. Introduction

This article makes a distinct contribution to this special journal edition on interdisciplinary approaches to the study of identity by examining how the identity of the drone operator has emerged in twenty-first century drone discourses. From newspaper headlines to anti-war activism, the term 'drone' has become ubiquitous in conventional and social media, as well as in official reports, newspapers and popular literature of the kind addressed in this paper. These discourses often imply that drones are independent robotic killing machines beyond the control of human beings and the constraints of law and personal ethics (Callam 2010; Williams 2010; Sauer and Schörnig 2012; Baggiarini 2015). Drone-based social imaginaries informed by science fiction, dystopian fantasy and apocalyptic anxiety are presented as a major

and ominous reality. Further, Wall and Monahan (2011: 246) argue, '[d]rone systems necessarily objectify, and most likely dehumanize, people targeted by them'.

The identity of the ever present, ever absent drone operator has been obscured as the first governments to use remote delivery of lethal air power – the US, UK and Israel – have all prioritised political, operational and technological secrecy above openness and transparency (Singer 2011; Benjamin 2012; Woods 2015; Knowles and Watson 2017). With limited or no access to the programmes concerned, scholars and popular commentators alike have postulated apparently incompatible outcomes and consequences despite drawing on the same drone characteristics and applications, while still unifying around critique of government policy and military activities. For example, Benjamin (2012) writes of the Afghan who is smoking, meeting friends, going to the bathroom 'never imagining that anyone is watching him'. Meanwhile Baggiarini (2015: 130) refers to 'the distanced, permanent and panoptic gaze(s) of drones', which relies on the subject being aware that (s)he is being watched. Elsewhere, and relying on similar evidence, Williams (2015) uses the phrase 'distant intimacy' to articulate the counterintuitive dimension of developing personal familiarity with a potential target on the part of the operator, despite the vast geographical separation involved.

The methodology used in this paper is drawn from Foucault, who locates the forming and self-forming of subjectivity in discourse (Foucault and Rabinow 1997: 224-5), to support critical engagement with the emergence of drone operator identity in two distinct ways. The first focuses on the identity of the drone operator as it has emerged through other-representation in public discourse: in newspaper and online media, as well as in official reports. In this domain, the drone operator is distant – absent even – and represented in discourse as a particular kind of, usually unethical, subject. The second examines self-created identity in the operators' discourse as it relates to their practices. This second domain of analysis is the extensive field research I conducted with drone operators from the UK's Royal Air Force Reaper drone community; the data collection includes 80 interviews and 25 written responses which address personal ethics and ethos in day-to-day practices. Two sets of data are used in these two contrasting approaches to drone operator identity – textual discourse in newspaper, media and official reports, and the empiricist discourse of collated drone operator interviews. Epistemologically they appear – are – inconsistent. They approach the drone operator through distinct lenses and, as author, I complicate the matter further with my own selection of discourse to analyse. However, this paper seeks to illustrate how identity is produced, rather than provide exhaustive conclusions about who the drone operator 'really is'. Consequently, a key assumption that runs through the discussion below is that drone operator identity is *created* and not just described in the different discourses.

The article proceeds by setting out the conceptual framework that will shape subsequent discussion. Two specific Foucauldian ideas will be used. First, there is Foucault's conception of discourse and how it operates in different domains (Foucault and 1997d: 225). The second element of the framework draws on Foucault's (1997a: 224-5) reflections on the means by which people are made known as subjects, or come to know themselves as subjects. The

second section will focus on how the drone operators' identity is constituted in relation to killing; in particular the extent to which (s)he conforms to codified morality in terms of rules and laws. The third section will provide a contrasting perspective by examining the personal discourse of British Reaper drone operators, identifying the means by which they come to see themselves as ethical subjects in their day-to-day drone operational practices, which includes conforming to UK military law and rules of engagement (ROE).¹ The paper will conclude by reflecting on the differences between these approaches and how they contribute to a more holistic understanding of the issues and challenges involved in the use of lethal drones.

2. Foucault, Discourse and Subjectivity

The use of discursive approaches in the field of International Relations (IR) can be found in a burgeoning literature. Milliken (1999: 233) sees discourses as 'social signs of signification' and cautions against conducting overly narrow discourse analysis on single texts, preferring 'a set of texts by different people' – thereby suggesting some kind of commonality of theme or focus for those texts. Foucault (1972: 8) argues for three conceptions of discourse and how it operates: 'the general domain of all statements...[or] an individualizable group of statements...[or] a regulated practice that accounts for a number of statements'. A version of the second of these understandings – an individualized group of statements – will be adopted in this study. Given the space limitations here, a further narrowing of focus in the discourses to be considered will help to make the subsequent analysis more practical. Foucault (1991: 54) also offered criteria for such an individualization of discourses: 'the linguistic system to which they belong, the identity of the subject which holds them together...the existence of a set of rules of formation for all its objects...all its operations... all its concepts...all its theoretical options'.

The limitations imposed by the use of a Foucauldian approach in this paper are acknowledged from the outset. Specifically, the extent to which the identity of the drone operator can be conceived through the mode of the subject. For Benhabib (1992: 237), Foucault's approach leaves him with 'thin' conceptions of the self. Even if Benhabib's observation is accurate, a thin but well-founded conception of drone operator identity still provides greater insight than either an inaccurate conception or no conception at all. Further, Foucault's (1997c: 290) subject 'is not a substance. It is a form' and is necessarily partial and contingent. That form is not consistent or ever-present within even the same individual.

Foucault (1997c: 290) gives an example of individuals having a different relationship to the self 'when you constitute yourself as a political subject,' and when 'you are seeking to fulfil your desires in a sexual relationship'. However, this disjuncture has benefits when applied to the example of the drone operators because, on a daily basis, they must form themselves as one kind of subject in their practices in a domain of war, watching and killing distant enemies. Then, at the end of each shift they travel – within minutes – into a domain of peace where they form themselves as subjects again, this time in their non-work-related practices as a family member or friend. For example, picking up children from school, cooking dinner, shopping at the

supermarket, or going to the cinema. In contrast to the self-formed ethical subjectivity of the drone operator in this historically unique mode of conducting warfare – distant yet intimate – is the view from the outside; representation in discourse in which the drone operator is conceptually present yet physically invisible behind secure fences and guarded barriers.

Foucault thereby offers a conception of ethical subjectivity that can be used to analyse the emergence of the subject in multiple ethical modes, from the desiring subject – the focus of his own analysis (1984a: 5) – to the subject of social concern or the subject of war (Lee 2010). Furthermore, Foucault's ethical subject emerges in two ontologically distinct but entwined trajectories: first, in relation to socially or culturally accepted rules, prohibitions and interdictions, which he calls the 'moral code' (1984a: 25); and second, through 'ethical problematizations based on practices of the self' (1984a: 5). The ethical subject is expected to conform to the former while also creatively engaging with the latter through a number of technologies of the self.

The internet is a democratizing force in access to, and dissemination of, discourse of any type, and drone discourse is no different. Further, individual bloggers or clicktivists can attract greater viewing traffic than conventional electronic document archives like the UN's by having more efficient links to search engines and incorporating effective search criteria. Therefore, contrasting drone discourses will be examined as discussion turns now to other-representation of the drone operator, usually the pilot, as (un)ethical. First, a UN document and related newspaper article will be considered, followed by analysis of discourse from blog sites that are openly available on the internet but which appear not to have the same degree of editorial control as the preceding UN/newspaper examples. This approach will be contrasted in the subsequent section, which will explore how identity is created in the self-representation of the drone operator.

3. Other-Representation of 'the Drone Operator'

In 2010 Philip Alston, UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, submitted a report to the UN Human Rights Council in which he outlined a number of background, legal and operational concerns as they related to targeted killing (2010). He specifically criticised the American use of drones both within and beyond recognised areas of armed conflict (Alston 2010: 7ff.), and at both government policy level and individual operator level. In his submission Alston cautions that 'because operators are based thousands of miles away from the battlefield, and undertake operations entirely through computer screens and remote audiofeed, there is a risk of developing a 'Playstation' mentality to killing' (2010: 25). With no existing military capability that closely resembled the technical, physical or emotional conduct of drone operations, Alston provides what Kahneman (2011: 98) would identify as a 'heuristic alternative': that is, substituting an easier or more straightforward idea or question as a method of solving more difficult problems or dealing with more difficult ideas (Kahneman 2011: 98; 2003: 1469). Alston substitutes a known or simple heuristic – what happens when people play computer games – with a difficult or unknown heuristic – what happens when people kill by remote control over vast distances. The locus of

this substitution would appear to be the computer screen, via which the images of war – or images of the artificial world of the game – are mediated.

Alston had to make a series of necessary assumptions in order to even propose that killing by drone can be equated to game playing. First and most important, that the drone operators are unable to sustain a mental distinction between images of real live human beings on a screen, and the computer generated images used in fictional games. Second, that there are therefore no physical, moral or emotional responses to actual killing, only the responses that a game would prompt. And third, the mental trauma that some US drone pilots have reported (Daborn 2016: 815ff.), and which this author has encountered in the course of his interviews with British drone operators (Lee 2017), must come from some other source, since mere game-playing is unlikely to produce such drastic effects.

Alston demonstrates one further kind of psychological manoeuvre as he articulates elements of his official UN report in a newspaper article: namely, ‘anchoring’ (Kahneman 2011: 119ff.). In an article for the UK’s Guardian newspaper entitled, ‘A killer above the law?’ Alston, co-authored with Shamsi, argued that ‘Britain’s use of drones in the war in Afghanistan must be in accordance with international law’ (2010a). While the article is ostensibly about the UK’s use of drones in Afghanistan, Alston and Shamsi ‘anchor’ their comments on British drone use in the activities of the CIA’s ‘secret drone killing programme’ in the border region of Afghanistan and Pakistan, and in the previously mentioned, “PlayStation mentality” that they say surrounds drone killings (Alston 2010). In the newspaper article, Alston and Shamsi (2010a) explicitly link video game-playing military personnel, physical remoteness, joysticks, and the killing of ‘real people’. In addition, such killing is referred to as ‘antiseptic’, as though there are no impacts on the person pulling the trigger to fire a missile on a distant enemy.

Alston and Shamsi also refer to a surge in CIA drone killings, questioning their legitimacy and positing that they might just be retaliatory on the part of the CIA by their operators. The next discursive device deployed in the article brings the focus back to the UK and calls for the British Ministry of Defence to establish accountability mechanisms to ensure that British drone operators function in accordance with international law. Despite the UK’s air force being a military organisation – in contrast to the CIA being a civilian organisation – and despite the lack of evidence that UK drone operators are operating in, say, Pakistan like the CIA (Pakistan being outside the UK’s recognised theatre of military operations), the anchoring effect prompts the reader to judge the UK’s drone operators’ activities in relation to the operationally, organisationally, politically and legally unrelated CIA. Interestingly, the United States Air Force and its use of drones is not criticised in Alston’s (2010) UN report in the same way that the CIA is criticised.

Kahneman (2011: 119) describes the ‘anchoring effect’ as occurring when ‘people consider a value for an unknown quantity before estimating that quantity’, adjudging the outcomes of the relevant experiments as ‘among the most reliable and robust results of experimental psychology’. There is not the scope in this paper for an exhaustive explication of the phenomenon. However, it can be observed at work here as Alston and Shamsi (2010a) use a newspaper article to represent the drone operator as a particular kind of

subject of political violence. The result is that the reader of their article who knows little or nothing about lethal drones and the variations in drone use between different states and different military organisations, will make her or his judgement about British drone operators based on the subjectivity of the – unrelated – CIA operators that has been provided. In Kahneman's terms (2011), before estimating the unknown 'quantity' of British drone operators' legal-ethical practices, the reader will be influenced to assume that they are closer to the CIA's (illegitimate) approach than they otherwise would if the CIA's practices had never been mentioned.

For Foucault (1984a: 28-9), 'in certain moralities the main emphasis is placed on [conforming to] the code', and instances can be seen in both examples of Alston's discourse discussed here: his official UN Human Rights report, and the newspaper article that draws upon that report. In the former Alston (2010: 7) introduces a 'secret targeted killing programme...reportedly conducted by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)' in Pakistan. Civilian operators are also reported to strike targets approved by 'senior government personnel' (2010: 8). In addition, in the recognised NATO battlefield of Afghanistan, the US military operators conduct unrestricted attacks on the Taliban and the 'drug lords' that fund them (2010: 8). In terms of the codified morality to which the CIA, the US military and their respective operators conform, the US Department of State specifies both the right to self-defence and International Humanitarian Law. However, apart from identifying these elements of a moral code that provides the framework within which US drone operators – civilian and military – conduct operations, no further detail about how the code is operationalized is offered. Ultimately, Alston's report (2010: 8) suggests ways of enhancing such a code: specifying who can legitimately be targeted and killed; introducing procedural safeguards; create 'accountability mechanisms'.

In summary at this point, Alston's UN report and his newspaper article on that report, constitutes drone operators in two ways. First, as obligated to the code – International Humanitarian Law – that shapes their conduct and, second, as game players, physically and emotionally distant from their targets, and removed from consequences of their actions. British drone operators are constituted in relation to the latter, without evidential support – only by discursive manoeuvre.

Moving away from Alston – but retaining the CIA emphasis – his 'Playstation killer' meme is reproduced as the drone pilot is again constituted as distant, irresponsible and unethical (Cole et al. 2010). Elsewhere, and going much further in constituting drone operators as unethical is blog-based polemic:

He is a drone 'pilot'. He and his kind have redefined the words 'coward', 'terrorist', and 'sociopath'. He is the new face of American warfare. He is a government trained and equipped serial killer. But unlike Ted Bundy or John Gacy, he does not have to worry about getting caught. It is his job...They PURPOSELY wait until they can kill dozens of children too... [these] child killers known as the CIA (Pittman 2013).

The drone 'pilot' here is the symbolically representative figure that incorporates the sensor operator (the person who fires and controls the missiles) and the mission intelligence coordinator (the person who ensures

that the correctly identified target, which could be a person, is struck). There is no attempt at a measured analysis of the complexities of delivering lethal force. Unlike Alston (2010) who examines drone operators and operations through the lens of codified morality in the form of international humanitarian law (IHL), Pittman (2013) eschews such code-oriented interpretation and constitutes the drone pilot as unethical in relation to subjective attitudes and specific actions. The subjectivity of the drone 'pilot' is formed as 'coward', 'terrorist', 'sociopath', and 'serial killer' in the conduct of CIA drone operations. In Foucauldian terms, the individuals lack any 'ethical substance'; that is, the part of the individual and the individual's behaviour 'which is concerned with moral conduct' (1997b: 263). In Foucault's *schema*, ethical substance underpins the subject's attitudes and behaviours. Such linkages between (un)ethical substance and (un)ethical action can be seen in Pittman's drone discourse (2013: [online]): drone pilots carry out a 'terrorism/ assassination program' and 'senseless act[s] of violence and murder' because of existing character traits and behaviours like 'sociopath' and 'serial killer'.

Further claims about drones and those who operate them are made elsewhere with greater recourse to social scientific evidence:

Social science research shows that drones are a gateway to moral disengagement, dehumanization, and deindividuation. The great distances drones operate over, manipulated by faceless-nameless-lawyeristic-voyeurs, creates an emotional, mental, and physical divide between 'us' (i.e. our government) and the enemies we kill. Drones allow us to dissociate our actions from our values, a useful high-cost and high-tech justification (Wilson 2011).

Wilson cites the research of psychologist Albert Bandura (2004), who proposes several mechanisms by which drone operators morally disengage from their targets. However, Wilson assumes that the proposed theoretical explanations for drone operator conduct can be applied unproblematically. He fails to distinguish between social science research that offers a theoretical basis for possible actions by drone operators, and social science research that engages empirically with the operators themselves. Bandura's (2017: 41-43) presentation of moral disengagement by drone pilots includes the use of euphemistic language to, in some way, avoid the reality of their actions, 'absolv[ing] themselves of 'collateral damage' by drone strikes through displacement and diffusion of responsibility', and viewing enemies as 'subhuman beings or dangerously deranged'. Bandura focuses on the US and the CIA's use of drones, again with the implication that his theorizing applies universally across all drone operators – a factor that will be revisited in the next section.

The applicability of purely theoretical approaches being applied to the experience of all drone operators has been questioned elsewhere (Lee 2013a; Lee 2013b; Lee 2015; Lee 2017). Further complexity arises when the disparate drone-related activities of the CIA, United States Air Force, Israeli Air Force and the UK's Royal Air Force are conflated, intentionally or otherwise, as in the Alston discourse. This conflation occurs despite different political contexts, legal frameworks and ROE which, in turn, shape the application of lethal force by those states. In other words, there are variations across military organisations when it comes to their authorizations and willingness to kill

civilians in the course of their operations. The secrecy surrounding these differences contributes to a discursive environment where facts and informed insight is lacking.

A rare exception to this secrecy, and a contrast to the other-representation illustrated above in the Alson and Shamsi (2010a) Guardian newspaper article, occurred in May 2017 when the UK Ministry of Defence released details of an RAF Reaper drone missile strike against Islamic State in Abu Kamal, eastern Syria. A Hellfire missile was used to kill a rooftop sentry and disrupted a public execution that Islamic State was about to carry out (MacAskill 2017). The way this secrecy exception was reported raises the issue of 'footing' – the discursive positioning of the speaker (Goffman 1979, 1981, cited by Potter 1996: 142ff). The title of the article – 'RAF drone strike disrupted public killing staged by Isis, says MoD' – immediately identifies the MoD as the origin, or 'principal' (Potter 1996: 143) of the story, the 'principal' being the individual or organisation whose position or view is being represented. In contrast, the Guardian newspaper takes the position of the 'animator' (Potter 1996: 143); that is, it says but does not 'own' the words or allow the words to be seen as indicative of its editorial position. The newspaper reproduced the MoD statement without commentary or opinion. The lack of representation, and the mere reproduction of the statement, distanced the journalist and newspaper from what the MoD presented as a 'good news about drones' story. The approach also enabled the Guardian to maintain its footing in opposition to drones. I will return to this incident in the next section.

Multiple problematizations of the drone operator have already been identified in the way that (s)he is constituted as (un)ethical in both popular and academic discourses: coward, terrorist, sociopath, serial killer, de-humanized, remote, detached, Playstation killer. As a result, the emerging subjectivity of the drone operator, especially the ethical subjectivity, is partial and externalised, constituted in discourse that has not included – because of official constraints – the words of active, operational drone crews. Such discourse, to use Jabri's term (1996: 7), 'delegitimizes' their use.

4. Drone Operator as Self-Constituting Subject

The focus of the present study/paper now shifts to primary research data I have gathered from RAF Reaper drone operators, which is used to explore how (s)he 'constitute[s] himself [and herself] as a moral subject of his [or her] own actions' (Foucault 1984: 352). This shift will reveal the self-representation at work as drone operators form their own identities in relation to their practices. This self-representation is framed here in terms of Foucault's practices of the self as drone operators form their identities in relation to ethical conduct. Foucault (1984a: 28) wrote of the practices of the self through which subjectivity is constituted in discourse:

There is no specific moral action that does not refer to a unified moral conduct; no moral conduct that does not call for the forming of oneself as an ethical subject; and no forming of the ethical subject without 'modes of subjectivation' and an 'ascetics' or 'practices of the self' that supports them.

Within this conceptual framework, this section draws on examples from extensive field research based on 80 interviews, and 40,000 words of written feedback from 25 drone operators over two studies.² The purpose is to gain an insight into how RAF Reaper drone operators form their identities, exploring modes of self-subjectivation and practices of the self at work in their discourses. This analysis will explore some of the means by which drone pilots, sensor operators and mission intelligence coordinators (the three members of a full crew) in the two Royal Air Force Reaper squadrons were able to form themselves as ethical subjects as they have conducted surveillance, reconnaissance and lethal strike operations over Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria.

Foucault (1984a: 28) allowed that actions which simply conformed to rules or laws could contribute to an individual seeing themselves – and being seen by others – as ‘moral’, but considered it to be insufficient. He considered the creative self-forming aspect of ethical subjectivity to be crucial. In 1983, the year before he wrote *The Use of Pleasure*, Foucault (1997b: 263-5) proposed four aspects of these practices, or technologies, of the self:

[First] the part of myself or my behavior which is concerned with moral conduct...[second] the mode of subjectivation, that is, the way in which people are invited or incited to recognize their moral obligations...[third] the means by which we can change ourselves in order to become ethical subjects...[fourth] the kind of being to which we aspire when we behave in a moral way.

Foucault was neither prescriptive nor rigid in setting out how the relationship to oneself emerges, and the way that emergence is framed in these criteria. For example, the part of the self that is ‘concerned with moral conduct’ – is not fixed: neither over time and cultures, nor between different individuals (1997b: 263). He identified ‘desire’ as a key factor for early Christians, ‘intention’ as the primary Kantian ethical substance, with ‘feelings’ more important as a motivator in the present (1997b: 263). Similar variation exists in the means by which individuals are encouraged to recognise their moral obligations – his ‘mode of subjectivation’ – and, correspondingly, to change their behaviour as a work of the self, on the self: all in pursuit of ends that can range from the religious to the humanitarian or philosophical.

As RAF Reaper drone operators discursively form themselves as ethical subjects below, they consistently recognize the importance of conforming to codes throughout. Crucially, however, the emergence of ethical subjectivity alongside conformity to codes will occur in response to the following questions – adaptations of Foucault’s aspects of the self above – concerning ethical motivations, means, intentions and teleological aims.

1. What is the basis of an individual’s ethical conduct?
2. How do individuals come to recognise their moral obligations?
3. In what behaviour do individuals see themselves as acting ethically during combat operations?
4. To what do individuals aspire when they behave in a moral way?

4.1 What Is the Basis of an Individual's Ethical Conduct

Consistent with the Foucauldian framework adopted here, several respondents identified a difference between conforming to codes – for example, IHL (Geneva Conventions) – and a broader morality that includes a subjective ethics element in the conduct of lethal operations. In the discussion to follow, to ease identification of the sources used in the analysis, written responses from respondents from 39 Squadron in Nevada are identified by letter (e.g. Respondent A), while written responses from XIII Squadron in Lincolnshire are identified by number (e.g. Respondent 3). Where first names are used, these are pseudonyms and the quotations are drawn from interviews with the author between July 2016 and June 2017.

Respondent 11 observes: 'Ethics do shape our decisions alongside LOAC [Law of Armed Conflict] and ROE', while Respondent 12 refers to 'the internally generated desire to do the right thing', acknowledging that this is probably somehow rooted in his Roman Catholic upbringing. Separately, Respondent B gives a more nuanced and elaborate response that differentiates morality from rule-following:

[D]uring a weapon employment, ethics are at the very forefront of one's thinking. It is one thing to simply follow the rules – LOAC, UK ROE, etc. – just because they are the rules. It is quite another to look at the morality of what one is doing and answer the personal question 'is what I am doing morally justified?'

An example of the basis of ethical conduct articulated by Reaper operators is will to duty: a desire to undertake actions that are expected of them and which others – notably 'friendly' soldiers or civilians on the ground – rely upon for their safety or survival. Over more than two years of research engagement with 39 (Reaper) Squadron and XIII (Reaper) Squadron it became apparent that the concept of duty is highly ingrained (common among military personnel more widely). Equally engrained is a strong reluctance to attract personal attention to this commitment for duty: it is taken for granted. This attitude is rooted in RAF pilot culture that has been reconstituted and reinforced over generations. In the RAF Reaper Force overt public emotional responses to extreme events – even killing – are rare. Instead, an ethos of deliberate calm pragmatism is fostered.

This is the background context for Respondents 8's statement: 'It does not affect me that sometimes our actions result in the death of enemy forces, I am simply there as a crew member to complete a mission'. 'Completing the mission' here is synonymous with fulfilling one's duty, and ethical conduct is an element of that duty. Respondent 8 goes on to make this connection explicitly: 'Throughout my participation as a member of a Reaper [crew] my only ethical considerations are that we operate within the law, which we have in every instance.' In this statement, emphasis is on rigid conformity to code-oriented morality – 'operating within the law'. The personalised basis for operating within the law – a desire to do one's duty – is implied but, consistent with behaviours and attitudes across both squadrons, usually unstated or understated.

Noting the relationship between law and personal ethics in Reaper drone operations, and their significance for his work, Respondent A states: ‘If my ethics do not match with [the laws I operate under] then my ethics take a back seat’. This prioritisation of conforming to codes – obeying the different laws that apply during lethal strike operations – is consistent across the Reaper Force and all of the operators: ‘The training system for UK RPA [Remotely Piloted Aircraft] continually reinforces the need to understand the ROE and LOAC [Law of Armed Conflict] in minute detail’ (Respondent F); ‘given the seriousness of the event, the emphasis on correct application of the ROE is always paramount when considering weapons employment’ (Respondent C).

However, this conformity to codified morality (for example, ROE) does not happen in either conceptual or practical isolation. Alternative bases for ethical conduct that have been articulated include ‘defending my country’ (Angie) and ‘Want[ing] to give something back [after serving on the ground in Afghanistan and seeing Afghans trying to break away from the grip of the Taliban]; looking after the guys’ (Ross). For Pat, Reaper is ‘as front line as you can get without being ‘out there’’, while Alison – who had passed the upper age limit to train as regular aircrew – was ‘craving something new’ and wanted to make a positive difference.³ Regardless of the reasons for individuals joining the Reaper Force and the many and varied reasons given as the basis for ethical conduct, the second question based on the Foucauldian framework asks:

4.2 How Do Individuals Come to Recognise Their Moral Obligations?

Foucault’s (1997b: 264) original formulation of this question refers to individuals being ‘invited or incited to recognize their moral obligations’. For the drone operators these invitations or incitements can be broadly divided into two groupings – those that are intrinsic to the Reaper community and those that are extrinsic. The former are, or have become, part of on-going praxis of the squadrons, with the latter coming in multiple formats from media coverage to anti-drone campaigning.

Respondent A states that ‘The training of anyone in the military but especially at 39 Sqn [squadron] involves daily training on the rules of engagement and the law of armed conflict. Nothing we do can fall out of these boundaries.’ The training described here is not of the type historically associated with military personnel, complete with heavy backpacks, assault courses and physical endurance as the body is trained for the extreme challenges found in war (though a degree of physical fitness is still required). Neither is it a simple reminding of the drone crews about what the rules and laws state. Rather, the training of the drone operators at 39 Squadron comprises a work on the self that is externally encouraged, monitored and enforced. However, this work (on the self) involves a form of internalisation of external rules that can be understood as integral to the development of character. The need for such personal development is rooted in the complex military operations conducted by the Reaper drone personnel: watching for extended periods and killing as necessary.

The pursuit of correct or virtuous living has been a focus of philosophers from the earliest times and that pursuit has consistently involved some form of self-

training that goes beyond the physical. Foucault cites both Plato's and Xenophon's insistence on training, '*askēsis*', to develop virtuous character through exercise of the soul, without which one cannot 'do what one ought to do nor avoid what one ought not to do' (Xenophon cited in Foucault 1984a: 72). It would not be reasonable to conclude that the training of drone crews involves some direct expression of Platonic philosophy or a replication of Xenophon's historical recollections. However, the classic Greek texts cited by Foucault highlight the ongoing relevance and complexity of character development, in a way that suggests some continuity with the self-formation of identity through drone practices.

Even when individuals are actively developing their skills and their characters – in the Foucauldian sense – rigid conformity to codes is paramount, and is a response to two factors. First, every time a missile is fired or bomb dropped it is subject to scrutiny at various levels within the RAF operational and disciplinary structure. And second, the full motion video feeds are observed in real time in multiple headquarters in the UK and overseas. If laws are broken it is likely that dozens or even up to a hundred or more witnesses will have seen it – including military lawyers. So while Respondent A also emphasises a training of the self, Ken offers another perspective, stating that while conducting Reaper operations you 'can't hide things'⁴ from a wider audience because so many people in different command centres around the world can be watching the video feed from his Reaper. Further, in interview he acknowledged that he spent a lot of time thinking about the audience rather than just mentally shutting them out and focusing on the task. This approach is reinforced by Respondent C who states, '[There] is the external scrutiny that our actions are subjected to, both by other members of the squadron and the wider military who have access to our video feeds, as well as the 'CNN effect' that has permeated modern warfare'.

Duty and well-intentioned altruism may well be primary motivators for some individuals when it comes to recognising their moral obligations; in addition there is also the panopticon disciplining effect of simply being watched all of the time. While the Reaper can be used to observe distant enemies for hours or days, the drone operator is continually subject to 'an inspecting gaze' (Foucault 1980: 155), for years on end. When I have asked sensor (weapons) operators about their immediate reactions after a missile strike, the general response is 'relief' that they did not mess it up.

4.3 In What Behaviour Do Individuals See Themselves as Acting During Combat Operations?

While there is a relationship between conforming to codes and the different aspects of ethical self-subjectivation, they also have a 'certain kind of independence' (Foucault 1997b: 265). Having emphasised the priority that drone operators give to conforming to codes, a further creative, self-forming aspect of drone operator identity emerges in response to this third question to come from Foucault's technologies of the self. Respondent F elaborates on the relationship between ethical action and written codes, prioritising the former over the latter, with prevention of civilian casualties being crucial for the RAF Reaper crew members:

The highest priority during any engagement is to prevent civcas [civilian casualties]/collateral damage. This responsibility is at the forefront of our mind before striking a target, followed closely by the compliance with ROE and LOAC. I am very much of the mindset that I would allow an insurgent, however important a target, to get away rather than take a risky shot that might have collateral impact.

In this approach, Respondent F's priority varies from Respondent A's – which was set out above and places conformity to law (codes) categorically above any personal ethic. In practical terms this contradictory prioritisation of personal ethics and obeying the law will not make a difference in how a missile or bomb strike is carried out, although the individual motivations for doing so might vary. The same mandated procedures will be followed before the weapon is fired and the same procedures will be followed afterwards: Battle Damage Assessment, which examines the immediate outcome of the strike, followed later by a debrief by a weapons debrief officer who will examine the whole process in minute detail through close analysis of the recorded video. However, there is a clear difference in the way in which the individuals form their identity as ethical subjects. Respondent J describes some of the thought processes that reveal a practical ethical dimension:

Ethical considerations are a large part of the pre-strike assessments. Where can we strike a target? Will this strike, by hitting a valuable piece of equipment the person/target is on/in/near affect a village's ability to harvest/work? Is the person close to his family compound, thereby meaning the first people to find the body, post-strike, are his own family? These are some of the questions I've been asked and asked of myself prior to the decision to strike a target.

Consideration of the wider communal and family impact of a lethal drone strike increases the humanization of prospective targets rather than dehumanizes them. The crews regularly reflect on the indirect impact of their actions as well as the direct consequences – especially where the taking of life is concerned. Respondent J's insight challenges one of the common popular discourses about drone operators, as represented by the Wall and Monahan (2011: 246) comment that 'Drone systems necessarily objectify, and most likely dehumanize, people targeted by them'. The claim is repeatedly rejected by operators across the Reaper Force, typified by Respondent 6's comment that, as the Mission Intelligence Coordinator in the crew, 'My role, beyond assisting identifying the target in an engagement, is to ensure no civilians become casualties'. After several years' experience, Respondent H is more resigned to being represented in popular discourse as unethical, saying, 'I guess we just have to live with the bad press and accusations that we kill civilians with the knowledge that what we actually do is employ weapons more safely than any other aircraft'. Such an attitude points to a kind of discursive stalemate: the individual – Respondent H – identifies with the legitimacy of his actions, while rejecting the criticism that is found in other-representation of drone operators as unethical.

4.4 To What Do Individuals Aspire When They Behave in a Moral Way?

The final consideration is the *telos* that the drone operators pursue while self-forming as ethical subjects. While there are as many variations as there are personnel involved, one strongly recurrent theme in the Reaper drone operators' discourse is the desire to construct themselves as having an ultimate aim in their actions: to act as a guardian. Respondent B articulates this ultimate aim and locates his morality in opposition to acts that he constitutes as unethical:

I believe that it is my personal morality, what I will accept or not, that decides how I will react to a given situation... I don't care what language you speak or what god you believe in (or not) or the colour of your skin. I do care that if you believe it is acceptable to poison the water supply in a girls school just because they are female, or it is justifiable to shoot a young girl in the face just because she wants an education, or you think that cutting the nose and ears off a young woman who tried to run away from a brutal husband is the correct form of punishment then you are my enemy and I will do whatever it takes to prevent you and others like you from being able to do it again!

Others articulate the protector dimension more explicitly: 'it's our responsibility to help protect [the people on the ground]' (Respondent I); 'I do not take life easily but am secure that in killing an insurgent I am potentially ensuring that another ISAF or ANSF⁵ soldier gets to go home to their family' (Respondent F). The last comment here makes a comparative calculation of the relative morality of the insurgent and the soldier. In this way, the protector/ guardian meme emerges strongly in squadron culture within the Reaper Force, and in different behaviours.

The protection of individuals on the ground in an area of drone operations has both passive and active dimensions. Passively, the intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities of the Reaper are brought to bear on the emergence of potential threats: direct attacks from enemy forces or indirect attack through the emplacing of improvised explosive devices. The latter poses as much risk to local civilian non-combatants – children and adults – as to ISAF or Afghan Army personnel. In addition, activities like beheadings or executions can be observed – and mental trauma experienced – as part of evidence gathering and the perpetrators followed afterwards as part of building up a wider understanding of individual and group activities. Actively, lethal force can be brought to bear against enemy fighters, unless proximity and therefore risk to civilians prohibits the use of weapons.

As mentioned earlier, a recent high profile example was introduced above when a Reaper crew disrupted a public execution by Islamic State in Syria in May 2017 (MacAskill 2017). On 21 May, a few days after the strike, I interviewed the pilot – Gav – who fired the missile. He confirmed the outline details released by the MOD and used in newspaper articles. On a routine reconnaissance mission he and his crew had spotted a gathering crowd 'being controlled by armed men at the intersection of two roads'. They recognised the hallmarks of a potential Islamic State public execution just before the prisoners were brought out of a vehicle. Gav described, 'I was going from being [mentally] 'stretched' towards 'panic' because [I wanted to save the

prisoners but] I could not see the solution'. A missile that hit near or in the crowd would cause multiple civilian fatalities. 'As soon as the 'sharpshooter [on the roof]' solution was suggested [by a colleague] I relaxed immediately'. In his desire to save the about-to-be-executed prisoners while not harming civilians, the *telos* of protector/guardian dominates this drone pilot's thinking and shapes his identity in his practice.

5. Conclusion

This brief engagement with the discursive landscape surrounding lethal drone strikes and some of the operators who carry them out has identified an important subjective dimension that is overlooked in public, political and scholarly drone debates. This dimension is commonly obscured by a lack of governmental and military transparency, which in turn is prompted by a desire to maintain operational secrecy, security and effectiveness. The identities, especially the ethical subjectivity, of the individuals who carry out lethal RAF Reaper drone missile and bomb strikes emerge in subtle and creative ways that are rooted in individual and collective practice. The other-representation of drone operators and lethal drone strikes in public discourse as illegitimate is based primarily on applications and interpretations of international law and international human rights law – the codes spoken about above. However, the latter approach does not recognise or acknowledge the subtle, complex and creative ethical dynamics at work in the individuals who are routinely tasked with taking action that has life or death consequences. This oversight is partly a result of the conflation of three questions: Why are drones used? How are they used? Who is using them? As these questions come to be interrogated in more nuanced and insightful ways, policy makers, operators, members of the public and anti-drone groups will all gain a greater understanding of the issues involved. They can also work towards a future where broader understandings of drones – their benefits and their limitations – can be achieved through increased engagement with those who operate them.

Notes

- 1 Rules of Engagement (ROE) are specific instructions given to military personnel during operations to ensure that the use of lethal force conforms to Law of Armed Conflict and the Geneva Conventions, for example. They will specify when weapons may, and may not, be legally deployed and under what circumstances. ROE will cover eventualities such as self-defence or defence of allied forces; when offensive action can be taken, or not; who is a legitimate target, or not.
- 2 'Royal Air Force Reaper: 21st Century Air Warfare from the Operators' Perspective', University of Portsmouth Research Ethics Committee Protocol E365, approved 21 October 2015, Ministry of Defence Research Ethics Committee Protocol 707/MODREC/15, approved 1 July 2016; 'Exploring the roles of personal ethics, individual identity and operational practices in the formation of a collective ethos in RAF Reaper squadrons', Ministry of Defence Research Ethics Committee Protocol 423/MODREC/13, approved 22 December 2013.
- 3 Personal interviews with author, 2017.
- 4 Interview with author, 2017.

5 ISAF: International Security Assistance Force; ANSF: Afghan National Security Forces.

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