

## Book Reviews

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Neil C. Renic. *Asymmetric Killing: Risk Avoidance, Just War, and the Warrior Ethos*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. xvi, 246. ISBN: 9780198851462. Hardback: £65.00; ebook: £54.17.

The year 2020 saw the publication of several exciting new contributions to the ever-expanding field of the Just War Tradition, with Neil Renic's *Asymmetric Killing: Risk Avoidance, Just War, and the Warrior Ethos* leading the charge. Shortly after, Victor Tadros published his volume, enticingly titled *To Do, to Die, to Reason Why: Individual Ethics in War*, and before the year was out, a final addition came in the form of *The Moral Status of Combatants: A New Theory of Just War*, by Michael Skerker.<sup>1</sup> With all their highs and lows, what all these volumes have in common is that they undertake the difficult task of thinking in earnest about what war is ultimately about: killing and dying, 'causing death and destruction'.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, Renic's opening words in the preface to his book invite the reader to venture into the circles of organized violence with Dantesque candour: '*Asymmetric Killing* is concerned with war, and more specifically, the killing and dying that constitutes it.' (p. vii) Yet, Renic does not require the reader to abandon all hope, as he takes a normative stance to approach warfare in the best tradition of Just War thinkers.

Before delving into the structure of *Asymmetric Killing*, it is worth highlighting one of the main virtues of Renic's work: its methodological approach. When writing about warfare, academics are constantly haunted by the risks of overtheorizing or underestimating its effects. Renic manages to eschew these risks thanks to the triple focus of his methodology. First, his prose is not abstruse and overly analytical, but clear and accessible, which is always a virtue in theoretical works, as clarity is a philosopher's courtesy to the reader. Second, instead of concocting *ad nauseam* infinite variations of the famous 'trolley problem' ethical dilemma, or offering fanciful thought experiments involving ray guns, evil twins or aliens, *Asymmetric Killing* draws on the rich deposit of military history – from sniping and manned aerial bombing to UAV operations – to illustrate its points, in the footsteps of other notable JWT thinkers such as Michael Walzer and Alex Bellamy.<sup>3</sup> Thirdly, and as a corollary of its clarity and historicity, *Asymmetric Killing* is eminently practical, perhaps the most valuable feature a book of its kind may aspire for. In that sense, it is a work aimed both at practitioners of armed conflict, as well

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<sup>1</sup> Victor Tadros, *To Do, To Die, To Reason Why: Individual Ethics in War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Michael Skerker, *The Moral Status of Combatants: A New Theory of Just War* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Roger Wertheimer, 'The Moral Singularity of Military Professionalism', in Roger Wertheimer (ed.), *Empowering Our Military Conscience. Transforming Just War Theory and Military Moral Education*, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 135.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*. 4th ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2006); and Alex Bellamy, *Just Wars: From Cicero to Iraq* (Malden: Polity Press, 2012).

as at the political communities they belong to, and on whose behalf they kill, asymmetrically or otherwise.

The book is divided into three main sections: Part I. Theory; Part II. Reciprocal Risk in War; and Part III. The Historical and Contemporary Challenge of Asymmetry. Chapter 1 of Part I outlines the phenomenon of asymmetric violence and the state of the field of its study, where radical asymmetry is presented as the culmination of technological advancement, as well as of doctrinal and political commitment to casualty reduction in war. In this chapter Renic also undertakes the task of ‘historicizing’ the challenge of radical asymmetry.

Chapter 2 addresses the moral challenge of radical asymmetry, introducing the thrust of Renic’s overall argument, the notion of ‘structural reciprocal risk’ between belligerents, i.e. the idea that war is collective violence between structured groups composed of combatants, and it is thus irreducible to one-on-one violence among individuals, or in Renic’s own words, ‘a sustained and pervasive imposition of danger upon and between belligerent parties’ (p. 35), a veritable ‘dialectic of killing and dying.’ (p. 53) This notion can be better illustrated in the thought any given soldier may have on the battlefield: ‘Maybe I won’t get the enemy today; maybe the enemy will get me. But if they do, then perhaps my buddies will eventually get back at them for that.’ According to Renic, in recent decades drone warfare has disrupted such structural reciprocity by posing the challenge of ‘radical asymmetry’ between belligerents.

In this chapter Renic also lays out the current debate within the Just War Tradition, between ‘traditionalism’, ‘revisionism’, and ‘contractarianism’. In brief, traditionalism (called ‘conventionalism’ by Renic) espouses the premise of the ‘moral equality of combatants’, regardless of the justice of their *jus ad bellum* cause to fight, as long as they abide by what Walzer called the ‘war convention’<sup>4</sup>, or the rules of *jus in bello*. Revisionists, on the contrary, led by Jeff McMahan, argue that combatants fighting an unjust war are not morally equal and are to be treated the same way an unjustified assailant is in self-defence situations between individuals during peace time.<sup>5</sup> Contractarianism, Renic argues, grounds the permissibility of targeting on a rational bargaining process, although it is not clear why he treats it as a discrete strand in the Just War Tradition considering that Skerker, for instance, uses contractarian arguments to shore up the traditionalist view.<sup>6</sup>

Although Renic does not unequivocally endorse any of these views, his doctrine of structural reciprocal risk seems to be compatible with the traditionalist argument for a differentiation between individual violence in peace time and organized armed force in warfare. Moreover, although they do not cite each other, Renic’s and Skerker’s works should be read in conjunction. Indeed, if Skerker erects storey upon storey of highly sophisticated arguments that shape up the complex edifice of ‘irreducible corporate action,’<sup>7</sup> Renic’s book works as the doorway into that intellectual habitat, through the threshold of structural reciprocal risk.

In Part II, Chapter 3 reflects on the warrior ethos and the importance of reciprocity within it. It is interesting that Renic decides to treat warrior ethos and Just War Tradition separately, considering others have included the chivalric code among the Just War Tradition’s sources.<sup>8</sup> Further, after the recent publication of the Brereton Report<sup>9</sup> on the abuses committed

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<sup>4</sup> Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, pp. 44, 138

<sup>5</sup> Jeff McMahan, ‘The Ethics of Killing in War’, *Ethics*, Vol. 114, No. 4 (July 2004), pp. 693-733. See also his *Killing in War* (New York: Oxford University press, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Skerker, *The Moral Status of Combatants*, pp. 129, 143.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Bellamy, *Just Wars*, p. 40.

<sup>9</sup> Online at <https://afghanistaninquiry.defence.gov.au> (last accessed 28 October 2021).

by Australian Special Forces in Afghanistan prompted by a toxic ‘warrior culture’ – as opposed to professional soldiering – Renic might want to reconsider or qualify the term ‘warrior ethos.’ Chapter 4 expands further on the debate between traditionalism/contractarianism and revisionism, with relation to radically asymmetric violence within the confines of structural risk.

Part III takes a historical overview of consecutive challenges to symmetry in war, including military sniping (Chapter 5), manned aerial bombing (Chapter 6), and UAV-exclusive violence (Chapter 7). Renic concludes that, whereas sniping and manned aerial bombing have become mainstream and ethically accepted means of warfare, drones distinctly undermine the structural reciprocal risk that characterizes war, dehumanizing the enemy, eroding the warrior ethos, and moving war closer to extra-judicial punishment. However, the author envisages a possible normalization of UAVs in the near future.

Finally, in his ‘Conclusion’ Renic calls for a reformulation of the laws of war in light of the challenge of radical asymmetry, even though the legal dimensions of drone warfare are not studied in this work, as announced in the Introduction. (p. 9)<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, the author forecasts a moral relaxation of the use of drones as more armies acquire them.

Renic’s *Asymmetric Killing* is one of 2020’s most significant contributions to the field of the Just War Tradition, as it advances the debate on killing in war skilfully balancing theoretical thinking, historical perspective, and practical awareness.

**Francisco Lobo**  
**King’s College, London**

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**Emel Parlar Dal & Emre Erşen (eds.). *Russia in the Changing International System*. New Haven and London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020. ISBN: 978-3-030-21832-4. Pp. xiv, 243. Paperback: £69.99; hardcover: £99.99; e-book: £55.99**

Emel Parlar Dal and Emre Erşen’s edited volume, *Russia in the Changing International System*, seeks to answer several important questions surrounding Russia’s foreign policy and status within the evolving global system. These questions relate to, *inter alia*, Russia’s status as a great vs. a rising power; Russia’s motives in and perceptions of the system; whether or not, and how, Russia’s views offer an alternative vision of the system; and how Russia’s actions in Ukraine and Syria, for instance, reflect Russian views and vision of the system. As a whole, the volume claims that Russia is playing a dual role - of both a great power and a rising power, that it proposes a view of world order that is in contrast with that of the West’s, and that it

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<sup>10</sup> For a legal analysis of the use of drones as a potential war crime from the perspective of International Criminal Law, see Francisco Lobo, *Uso de Drones en el Derecho Penal Internacional de los Conflictos Armados* (Santiago: Librotecnia, 2019). On the legal and ethical implications of the ‘capture or kill’ debate in contemporary International Humanitarian Law literature, see Francisco Lobo, ‘The “Capture or Kill” Debate Revisited: Putting the “Human” back in “Human Enhancement of Soldiers”,’ *The Military Law and the Law of War Review*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (December 2020), pp. 85-120.