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RETAINING DIGNITY IN AUTONOMOUS AND AI-MEDIATED WARFARE

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Abstract In debates surrounding autonomous weapon systems (AWS) and AI-enabled systems in the military, "dignity" often comes to the fore in critics' objections, and though some critical voices are skeptical of the ultimate value of dignity in discussions of morality and law in war, there are those who treat the concept as the ultimate objection, subject to no rebuttal from either philosophical arguments or "technical improvements". However, as we argue in this article, dignity as invoked in the AWS and military AI debates fails to provide a convincing objection to such systems without also objecting to much of modern warfare as such. More than this, we argue that dignity – as conceived by critics in these debates – is fundamentally out of place in discussions on the morality or legality of war. We develop a novel narrow conception of dignity which avoids the problems raised by the critics' conception, and further argue that, given a conception of dignity befitting the realities of warfare, this value may actually be furthered through the use of AWS and AI-enabled systems.

Keywords Dignity, AI, Autonomous Weapon Systems, Military Ethics, Digital Dehumanization

1. Introduction

The harnessing of artificial intelligence (AI) and autonomous systems in war has been hailed by many as not just a military breakthrough, but also a humanitarian one, as these systems are argued to be able to prosecute wars in a far more discriminate, limited, and careful way, and without any of the distinctly human traits and failings that can lead to mistakes and criminal actions (e.g., things like fatigue, confusion, anger, etc.).[1] However, critics of autonomous weapon systems (AWS) and AI-enabled weapons have raised numerous objections to the development and deployment of these, voicing concerns that they may make war more likely,[2] create grave risks of targeting protected persons,[3] or that their use will give

1. (Arkin 2009, 2010). See also (Simpson and Müller 2015) for discussion of how AWS may help in assigning responsibility for criminal acts in war.

2. (P. Asaro 2008), pp. 56–58; (Altmann 2009); (N. Sharkey 2012), p. 122; (Heyns 2013), pp. 11–12; (Gubrud 2014), p. 39; (Rickli 2015); (Human Rights Watch 2018), p. 6; (Masood and Baig 2023). (Wood 2022); (Zając 2022), Ch. 9.1; and Wood *forthcoming* for forceful rebuttals to these arguments. For more measured assessment, see (Meier 2017; Leys 2018, 2020; Horowitz 2019; Sechser, Narang, and Talmadge 2019).

rise to responsibility gaps in the event that mistakes are made (to name just a few).[4] However, perhaps the most fundamental objection to AWS and AI-enabled systems is that their use would violate the dignity of those targeted by such systems.[5] Such dignity-based objections also have the benefit of not being subject to rebuttal via technical or institutional improvements that might address certain of the preceding critiques.[6] However, as we argue in this article, critics' objections from dignity fail to provide compelling reasons against the use of AWS or AI in war without also objecting to much of modern war. Moreover, the critics' formulation of dignity is fundamentally out of place in discussions of the morality or legality of war. Given this, when assessing new weapons and technologies, we must look to a conception which at least makes sense of accepted and acceptable practices in war. We further argue that, contrary to critics' arguments, autonomous and AI-enabled systems may actually provide a means for protecting and bolstering dignity in war. Such protection of dignity will demand that these systems be designed and deployed with an eye to our ethical and legal commitments, but nothing about autonomy or artificial intelligence in weapon systems fundamentally undermines our capacity to treat enemies with due respect and honor in accordance with their dignity.

Before moving into the arguments themselves though, it will be useful to clarify what we mean by "autonomous weapon system". Following the United States Department of Defense (US DoD) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), we define autonomous weapon systems as systems which have autonomy in the "critical functions" required for selecting and engaging targets[7] and which can carry out such selections and engagements without human intervention.[8] Centrally, AWS are understood to be systems which do not require contemporaneous human input in order to select and engage targets (though humans may be involved in some or all mission phases).[9] This understanding is broad, including systems which are lethal or non-lethal, mechanistic or endowed with artificial intelligence (simple or complex), anti-personnel or anti-materiel, etc. The definition's breadth also makes it encompass a variety of systems such as anti-radiation missiles and close-in weapon systems (i.e., anti-missile systems) which have been in use for decades.[10] It tracks, however, to the core element of *autonomous* selection and engagement of targets.[11] Regardless of one's precise definitions of AWS, the main relevant point is that such systems execute at least some processes which determine whether certain humans will live or die. It is this which many critics of AWS and military AI point to as the crux of the objection from dignity, and thus it is this aspect which should be borne in mind going forward.

3. For discussions focused on mistaken targeting of civilians, see, e.g., (N. Sharkey 2010; Guarini and Bello 2012; Human Rights Watch 2012, 2016; Sparrow 2015, 2016; Winter 2020; Stop Killer Robots 2022). For focus on mistaken targeting of combatants surrendering or otherwise *hors de combat* and thus protected from attack (N. Sharkey 2008, 2012; Human Rights Watch 2012; Chengeta 2016b). See also (Lieblich and Benvenisti 2014), pp. 278–282 for a more nuanced and theoretical objection to AWS grounded in duties to respect surrender. For responses to such objections, see, e.g., (Pacholska 2023; Wood 2026b).

4. (Matthias 2004; P. M. Asaro 2006; Sparrow 2007; N. Sharkey 2007; Pagallo 2011; Wagner 2014; Chengeta 2016a; Crootof 2016). Cf. (Königs 2022; Hindriks and Veluwenkamp 2023; Wood 2023a) for responses to these arguments.

5. (P. Asaro 2012; Human Rights Watch 2012, 2018; Rosert and Sauer 2019; Saxon 2021). Cf. (A. Sharkey 2019).

6. (Rosert and Sauer 2019) relies on dignity for precisely this reason.

7. (International Committee of the Red Cross 2014), p. 5.

8. (International Committee of the Red Cross 2021b), p. 1; (US Department of Defense 2023), p. 21.

9. Even for fully autonomous systems, humans are involved in various stages of a mission besides merely target selection: mission planning, platform preparation, real-time overwatch or supporting efforts, mission de-briefing, battle-damage assessments, etc. In addition, a fully autonomously executed mission would still very likely involve monitoring and data from other manned and unmanned systems (e.g., satellites, AWACS, intelligence aircraft, etc.).

10. (Boulanin et al. 2020; International Committee of the Red Cross 2021a; Heller 2023; Wood 2023b, 2023a).

11. Further definitional and taxonomic work may be found in (Williams 2015; Boothby 2016; Altmann and Sauer 2017; Caron 2020; Taddeo and Blanchard 2022; Wood 2023b; Pacholska 2024).

2. Dignity: The View from AWS Critics

Dignity serves as a founding value for many institutions or sets of principles. At the national level, "as of 2012, nearly 85 percent of countries use the term 'human dignity' in their constitutions",[12] and Article 1 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that

> All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.[13]

In the debates on autonomous weapons, dignity has long been utilized by critics as an argumentative strategy, as the concept's value is often not understood to be contingent on empirical points or subject to rebuttals rooted in consequential reasoning. Moreover, the variety of definitions and understandings of dignity allow for diverse critiques to be raised, all under the same intuitive heading that AWS use would "violate dignity", however the term is to be understood. In the following, we will focus on three main arguments from dignity – with sometimes overlapping points – against the deployment of AWS,[14] drawing out for each objection what underlying view(s) of dignity are being invoked or implicitly relied upon.

First, virtually all conceptions of dignity require the valuing of human life. This, argue critics, generates an implicit demand that human judgment be present whenever life-and-death decisions might be made. Put differently, "[w]hen it comes to killing, each instance is deserving of human attention and consideration in light of the moral weight inherent in the active taking of a human life".[15] Failure to provide such human judgment in these decisions of singular magnitude "means that people are treated simply as targets and not as complete and unique human beings, who may, by virtue of this status, deserve to meet a different fate".[16] As AWS are not agents and cannot engage with the humanity or dignity of potential targets, instead treating them merely as objects to be examined through mechanistic or algorithmic processes, their use, so the objection goes, cannot be in accordance with the demands of dignity.[17]

Second, and in a related vein, one may object that dignity, understood in a Kantian sense of not treating people as mere means, but instead ends in themselves, furthermore involves a (set of) relational duties guiding how moral agents ought to interact with other moral agents.[18] War is a unique human interaction, but it is still one which is (or at least, ought to be) governed by relational duties between humans. And if one of our relational duties, rooted in dignity, is that we are required to treat others (including our enemies) with respect, then this may argue against the use of AWS.[19] This is because AWS cannot, by their very nature, treat enemies (or anyone) with respect, in the same way a toaster or subway turnstile cannot treat someone with respect. If the objection holds, then use of AWS "may itself be unethical insofar as it expresses a profound disrespect for the humanity of our enemies".[20]

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12. (Saxon 2021), p. 30, citing (Shultziner and Carmi 2014).
13. Article 1, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, UNGA Resolution 217 (III) A, 10 December 1948. See also (McCrudden 2008; Waldron 2012; Michael 2014). For examinations of the intellectual history of "dignity", see (Rosen 2012; Waldron 2013; Debes 2017).
14. The arguments listed here represent some of the most common objections, or those espoused by the most influential scholars or institutions, but this should by no means be viewed as an exhaustive list of objections from dignity. For a recent and more comprehensive classification of dignity-based objections to AWS, see (Matsumoto and Arai 2024).
15. (P. Asaro 2012), pp. 708–709.
16. (Heyns 2016a), p. 11. See also (Heyns 2014).
17. (Johnson and Axinn 2013).
18. For examination of Kant's moral philosophy and relational duties, see, e.g., (Korsgaard 1992).
19. For clarity, dignity is not to be equated with respect here, but rather dignity implies a requirement that one show due respect to others. Failure to show such respect thereby implies failure to fulfill at least one duty born of dignity.

More strongly still, one may hold that in relegating lethal decision-making to machines, "we treat our enemy like vermin, as though they may be exterminated without moral regard at all".[21]

The central conception of dignity in both of these objections is arguably Kant's second formulation of the categorical imperative, that we ought never to act in such a way that we treat humanity or individual humans as means only, but always as ends in themselves.[22] This further implies that we are required to show respect for the humanity of others. The contention of AWS critics is that delegation of life-and-death decisions to machines fundamentally violates this demand for respect and thus "having a machine deciding whether you live or die is the ultimate indignity".[23] More than this, reducing humans to the status of objects constitutes a fundamental breach of dignity by denying the intrinsic worth or value of humans as "ends in themselves".

Both of the above objections have roots in the non-contingent value of dignity, with the former focusing on *human judgment* and its importance in the *process* of targeting, the latter placing emphasis on the *valuation* of individuals which presupposes an agent capable of doing such valuation. These non-contingent concerns underscore inherent ethical dilemmas tied to AWS, dilemmas which would be unaffected by technological advancements or other contextual factors. The focus of these objections is also not on whether AWS would outperform human soldiers by any indicator or metric, but rather, even supposing they could, whether we are permitted to deploy such systems, given what they imply for those against whom they are being used.[24]

Finally, one may object that by using AWS, those deploying them undermine their own dignity. Focusing on the intra-personal demands of dignity in Kant's moral philosophy, we may argue that "the moral worth of a person's life is tied directly to the possession and fulfillment of his or her moral autonomy and duty to respect the value and moral agency of others".[25] The dignity humans inherently possess thus grounds their ability to expect and exact respect from others, and "[a]bsent this mutual respect, humans lose their autonomy – their moral agency – which grounds 'the dignity of a human and of every rational nature'".[26] Anything which undermines a human's capacity to make moral judgments can thus be seen as undermining that person's dignity. The use of AWS represents a two-fold challenge on this front, in that there is argued to be an abdication of moral responsibility each time lethal decision-making is outsourced to machines, and over the long term, habitual use of AWS may atrophy combatants' general ability to meaningfully exercise their moral autonomy. Moreover, this objection can be argued to hold even if the use of AWS "may preserve human dignity by reducing the loss of life on the battlefield and the overall suffering caused by war".[27]

However, despite the intuitive appeal of these objections from dignity, each is subject to criticism. First, the presumed non-contingent nature of dignity presupposes a particular philosophical stance at odds with certain recent pragmatist trends in the philosophy of tech-

20. (Sparrow 2016), p. 112.
21. (Sparrow 2007), p. 67. See also (Heyns 2016b).
22. (Kant 2011), p. 41 (4:433). See also (Hill 1980; Korsgaard 1986) for exploration of the humanity formulation. See (Navon 2023) for discussion of dignity in the Jewish faith, which also "entails honoring people as a Thou, relating to them as a subject and appreciating their inherent worth simply as human beings" ((Navon 2023), p. 221).
23. (Heyns 2014), p. 8.
24. (A. Sharkey 2019). Cf. (Heller 2023) for critique.
25. (Saxon 2021), p. 23.
26. *Ibid*, referencing (Kant 2011), p. 43 (4:436).
27. (Saxon 2021), p. 35. See the entirety of Chapter 3 for Saxon's full arguments to this effect. On these general points surrounding human judgment and responsibility, cf. (Wood 2023a; Valle and Lara 2026).

nology.[28] And even if one accepts some non-contingent conception of dignity (indeed, our conception below is open to this possibility), the conceptions espoused by AWS critics and which serve as sources of objection to autonomous and AI-enabled systems will, in fact, prove to be far broader than just this, cutting against whole swaths of actions and tools in modern war. The pacifist may find such a conclusion welcome, but it is far outside the scope of the debates around only autonomous and AI-enabled systems, and ought not be permitted as an objection to these alone without one paying heed to its larger impacts.

Second, the connection between upholding the value of dignity and the necessity of having a flesh-and-blood human making every decision remains poorly defended, with authors claiming this to be "presupposed",[29] "implicit" in International Humanitarian Law (IHL),[30] or based on some "existing social understanding".[31] But while we might acknowledge some intuitive strength to this argument, without convincing reason for this position, it seems to be nothing more than an elaborate statement of our own underlying prejudices. Beyond this, there are numerous examples of weapons which make final engagement decisions without humans necessarily being involved, and where dignity does not plausibly seem to be infringed upon.

Close-in weapon systems used for missile interception have been in use by major navies around the world for decades, despite the fact that these can operate autonomously and target manned aircraft as well. Anti-radiation missiles which can select and engage targets without human input have existed since the 1960s. And more recently, the long-range anti-ship missile (LRASM) can autonomously "detect and destroy specific targets within a group of numerous ships at sea".[32] The existence for decades of numerous autonomous weapons, all without any condemnation or calls for prohibition on grounds of dignity, calls into question whether the concern is about autonomy or AI, or is rooted in something else entirely. And while an AWS critic might choose to bite this bullet and insist that these other systems also infringe on dignity, such a move squarely puts the burden of proof on those making such a move, given how many autonomous systems have been used for such a long time without concern.

Regarding the second objection, we can accept the relational dimension of dignity and the fact that human beings, as the only bearers of moral agency, are the only ones who can respect this value. However, human relationships are continuously and increasingly being technologically mediated in other spheres of our lives (friendship, love, health, education, etc.), without this seeming to necessarily prevent our respecting dignity or any other human value. On the contrary, technology can (and ought to) be designed to promote or at least not harm these values. In the context of warfare, it has also been the case throughout history that significant innovations were sometimes condemned on grounds of being in violation of dignity or other values, with Pope Innocent II proclaiming at the Second Lateran Council that "We prohibit under anathema that murderous art of crossbowmen and archers, which is hateful to God".[33] Yet norms of warfare shifted to meet the challenges of modestly remote systems like (cross)bows, despite the fact that users of those weapons could often "not choose, or even know, the specific target(s) and the precise timing and/or location of the resulting application(s) of force" which would result from their volleyed attacks, a critique that has been leveled explicitly against AWS.[34] There is thus strong reason to view the hesitance and

28. (Keulartz et al. 2004; Coeckelbergh 2020).
29. (P. Asaro 2012), p. 700.
30. (Heyns 2016a), p. 8.
31. (Sparrow 2016), p. 109.
32. (Heyns 2016a), p. 5.
33.https://www.papalencyclicals.net/councils/ecum10.htm, accessed Nov. 14, 2025.

resistance to emerging military technologies as most likely a passing concern rather than a principled stance, a point reinforced by the lack of consistency with regards to other existing autonomous systems which have not seen criticism (see above).

Turning to the final objection, while we would grant that autonomous systems open *a risk* that combatants may attempt to abdicate responsibility for the outcomes they bring about through the use of AWS, there is nothing about AWS that necessitates that combatants would not or could not own and be fully conscious of the moral weight of the decisions they make. Moreover, the objection rests on a fundamental mistake echoed in the first objection as well, that machines "make decisions" about who lives and dies. Machines do not "make decisions" though. They execute processes, in line with their programming, the limitations they are given (and subjected to by nature), the targeting parameters humans set for them, and the hardware limitations put in place in virtue of the load-outs they are deployed with. All of these things make a particular AWS deployment highly limited by and connected to the agency and choices of the human(s) responsible for that deployment, humans who are ethically and legally required to know the limits and risks of the systems they are deploying.[35] And each of these choices represent morally meaningful opportunities for humans to show respect for the dignity of their adversaries, in virtue of considering in advance what their enemy's dignity is expected to demand in the moment of contact with an AWS. Combatants may not always get it right, and are almost certain to sometimes get it wrong, but this is a far cry from claiming that they *cannot* exercise their capacity to make moral judgments when deploying AWS.

While not alone in questioning dignity's use in debates on AWS or military AI, we deviate from other scholars who dismiss it as an ambiguous or directly useless concept[36] or those who, even with a more sympathetic approach to dignity, downplay its potential relevance in discussions of autonomous and AI-enabled systems.[37] Dignity remains a central value in society and in the ethics and laws of war. What remains to be shown is how that value can be contextualized to the specific case of warfare without either stripping dignity of its core tenets or expanding it so broadly as to undermine any prospect for permissibly waging war. With this in mind, let us turn to the unfortunate realities of war, examining how the critics' objections from dignity canvassed above fare on the line of contact. By demonstrating the limits and misunderstandings of the critics' positions, we can hopefully chart a course toward a viable view of dignity for modern warfare.

3. Dignity in War

Dignity as respectful treatment toward oneself and others, befitting the intrinsic worth and humanity of all persons, provides an idyllic guide for conduct. Unfortunately, that guide seems out of place in much of modern war. When we drop bombs, fire artillery, or strafe enemy positions, there seems to be little in terms of respect as that term is understood in everyday use. And even if we restrict ourselves to purely "up-close-and-personal" fighting, striking and potentially killing individuals while we can "see the whites of their eyes" seems to betray no great extension of dignity or humanity to our fellow man. More than this, there are two core aspects of modern warfighting that undermine dignity as conceived of by critics. By exploring these and showing precisely where critics' conceptions fail in the context of war, we may establish a roadmap for recapturing a sense of dignity which is sensitive to

34. (International Committee of the Red Cross 2021b), p. 1.
35. For fuller arguments for these points, see (Wood 2026a).
36. (Saxton 2016; Baker 2018; Pop 2018).
37. (Birnbacher 2016; A. Sharkey 2019).

the realities of how wars are fought. More than this, a view of dignity tailored to war may also plot a course for the permissible use of autonomous and AI-enabled systems as well, providing a guide to harnessing these systems while paying due respect to the humanity and inherent worth of those we engage with in combat.

3.1 Johnny's a Marine Now

The critics' conceptions of dignity above all give some credence to Kant's injunction that we treat individuals as ends in themselves, that even in war, one is required to show respect to the inherent humanity and intrinsic worth of one's enemy. Unfortunately, the realities of war paint a subtly but critically different picture, with combatants being subject to destruction in an extremely broad array of situations and with little regard to what they have done, may be about to do, or are morally responsible for. Put simply, how we treat our enemies *qua enemies* in war is at odds with how we would or ought to treat them *qua* persons outside of war, with the former showcasing clear tensions with the idea of respecting them as ends-in-themselves as that notion is usually understood.

In warfare, combatants are targetable at all times and places,[38] simply in virtue of their being combatants. This status-based targeting is rooted in and justified by the fact that combatants are not targeted as individuals, but rather *as combatants*.[39] Whether the person being targeted is a John, Jimmy, or Jane, a man or woman, of some ethnicity, creed, or otherwise is besides the point. What matters is that they are combatants, for as combatants, they are *assets* of an enemy force and targetable as such.[40] Critically though, there is a distinction here between the humanity and the combatancy of an individual enemy soldier; it is "the combatant" that is being targeted, but not "the person". And this point is not merely semantic, but holds legal, ethical, and practical weight as well.

So long as enemies remain willing and capable of fighting, they may be subjected to lethal violence, violence directed at their station as combatants.[41] It is morally[42] and arguably legally[43] preferable to overcome their capacity for violence without killing them, a point reflected in military doctrine,[44] but if that is not practicable, then enemies may be subjected to (potentially lethal) violence with no regard for anything other than their status as combatants.[45] The limit to this is when enemies choose to surrender or are rendered *hors de combat* (implications of this for dignity in war are discussed in Section 3.3 below). Fundamentally though, until enemies in wartime are overcome, they are not required to be treated "as ends in themselves", but are to be deterred, persuaded, deceived, confronted, and if need be, neutralized, sometimes in a lethal fashion. At the very least, enemies *qua enemies* are treated as

38. Importantly, as soon as a combatant is rendered *hors de combat* and thus is no longer a participant in combat, they are protected from attack, a point whose implications for dignity are discussed at length in Section 3.3.

39. This point betrays that our argument follows the *traditionalist* camp in the ethics of war. Exploring or even canvassing the divide between traditionalism and revisionism is far beyond the scope of this article, but it is worth simply noting for the reader that we, following scholars like (Walzer 2006), take status-based targeting to be a justified norm of war (as, indeed, it is the norm in IHL).

40. To Sparrow's point above, that we ought not "treat our enemy like vermin, as though they may be exterminated without moral regard at all" ((Sparrow 2007), p. 67), while "extermination" is almost certainly too strong of a word (and liable to bring forward genocidal and other atrocious connotations), there is a sense in which warfare follows the mold of what Sparrow is condemning; aircraft, tanks, ships, and people are all assets and *as assets* may be destroyed without moral regard. Human combatants raise an additional challenge though, because they are assets and also persons, and their personhood is deserving of respect and protection (to the extent possible). But their *status as a combatant* is something which may be treated exterminatively, even while soldiers seek to limit potential harms to the individual acting in the role of "combatant". See (Zając 2022), Ch. 8, esp. pp. 308–314, for related arguments.

41. (Green 2000), p. 124.

42. (Garraway 2009; Goodman 2013).

43. (Mayer 2013).

44. (Lee et al. 2015), pp. 11, 14.

45. Many thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing us to be more clear and careful in presenting this point.

obstacles to be overcome. This does not deny their intrinsic worth or humanity; rather, it subsumes these under their combatant status, subjecting them to a distinct conception of respect and dignity, one which pays heed to their dual nature as both human ends and military assets.

The point is even stronger when one considers that it is not just the fighting end of a military that is targetable, but also its logistical arms, rear echelons, and other non-combat support units. Some authors argue that what makes combatants liable to harm is that they have "made themselves dangerous men" in some sense,[46] but this ignores the fact that truck drivers, cooks, and administrative workers in forward operating bases are all targetable. To be sure, such individuals do all provide some general contribution to the overall fighting capacity of a military, and to that extent, these individuals contribute to a macro-danger. Yet even so, it is hard to see how a military clerk filing, say, decommission orders for severely wounded soldiers meets the standards of being a "dangerous man". In any event, all such individuals are also permitted to surrender, and thus remove their liability to being targeted, but until they do so, they are "fair game", as it were. The reason for this is because of their status as military individuals, and it is the status alone that makes them targetable, without any regards for these individuals as ends in themselves.

With these points in mind, it would seem clear that during the course of fighting in war there is neither room for dignity as conceived of and leveraged by AWS critics, nor a clear way in which we could retain such a view while still having effective militaries. After all, we cannot stop and engage our enemy with words, talking through our states' respective grievances, and if we are aiming to kill the enemy, it is in almost no cases because of some particular act that enemy has committed which makes them "deserving" of that fate or which would justify it. And none of this shows respect to our enemies in keeping with their human dignity. Humans are targeted because of their status as combatants, and their combatancy is treated as an obstacle to be overcome, a threat to be removed. Again though, once an enemy has been overcome militarily (i.e., they are rendered *hors de combat*) they are then afforded a full measure of respect and dignity, granted a host of protections in keeping with their personhood, *but not until that time*; as long as enemy soldiers are serving in their roles within a military, they *as combatants* are obstacles to be overcome, and actions toward them will be of a kind with actions toward enemy tanks, aircraft, or other objects to be removed. Dignity as understood by AWS critics – as intrinsic worth, respect, or a view of humans as "ends in themselves" – cannot ground the critique of AWS without also objecting to a central element of modern war.

3.2 Call Down the Thunder

While the above challenge to dignity centered around the status combatants have and the fact that they may be targeted because of that status, irrespective of anything else, it is also the case that certain types of action commonplace in modern warfare are, of their nature, likely to be incapable of respecting dignity (as conceived of by AWS critics), for reasons similar to those just presented.

In modern wars, there are many combat actions which are not directed specifically at individuals, but rather at broad designated areas. If we consider artillery barrages, bombing runs, and the strafing of enemy positions, such actions are often not targeted at specific individuals or assets, but rather aimed at "sweeping", "clearing", or even simply "pounding" enemy positions.[47] And even if we restrict ourselves to line-of-sight weapons like rifles and

46. (Walzer 2006).

machine guns, where combatants must actively take aim when firing, we can also find instances where their efforts are more concerned with "sweeping" an area or "raking it with fire" than with actually targeting individuals. In all of these cases, there are challenges to combatants treating their enemies with the respect owed due to their intrinsic worth. This is because such actions, in a very real sense, do not treat with enemies at all; they treat with space.

When conducting area attacks, the aim of the attack often is *the area*, not necessarily anyone in that area. In point of fact, though militaries will not generally fire upon grid coordinates known to be empty (that would be wasteful of one's limited resources), it is sometimes entirely reasonable to "pound" an area prior to assault whether or not one knows enemies are there. This is because the point is sometimes not strictly to kill or eliminate enemy assets which are known to be there, but rather to, quite literally, clear any legitimate targets that *could be in the way* of approaching friendly forces. Thus, while the purpose of sweeping maneuvers, bombing runs, and artillery strikes may sometimes be to destroy discrete enemy assets, they may just as well be aimed at simply *sweeping the area*. And in that act of sweeping, clearing, etc., commanders and those executing attacks are not acting against individual enemy combatants (except in one-on-one engagements between individual combatants or combatant groups). Rather, they are acting so as to capture a space, and if that space happens to be occupied, then they are simply removing whatever occupants happen to be present (within the limits of morality and law). Here, we again see the view of (potential) enemies *qua enemies* as obstacles to be overcome. Additionally, we see a further challenge to dignity, namely that combatants carrying out such area attacks are often not directly treating with people at all, but rather with grid coordinates.

A further consideration worth bearing in mind is that many casualties in modern war are often not the result of direct targeting of combatants, but rather scenarios where individuals – combatant or civilian – are incidentally killed collateral to the destruction of equipment, munitions, or sites of military value (e.g., bridges, munitions factories, power plants, etc.).[48] Attacks on such sites which are ethically and legally permissible will very often cause military and civilian deaths. Yet because these deaths will not necessarily be intended by those launching the strikes, there may be difficulties to seeing how combatants can pay respect to those being incidentally killed or treat them "as ends in themselves" while launching attacks. In point of fact, beyond ensuring that proper precautions in attack have been taken and that collateral damage has been minimized to the extent feasible, combatants will have their focus on *the site* or *the area* being struck, and not on the individuals inside or adjacent to that site/area, and so combatants may not be considering or treating with individuals at all (again, subject to minimal ethical and legal constraints).[49]

Given these points, we can see that there is a very poignant sense in which area attacks, especially those aimed *at the area* (rather than persons/assets within the area), are in grave tension with the AWS critics' conception of dignity. *Pace* Sparrow, such attacks are not about exterminating people as though they were pests or vermin, but they are about the simple destruction or elimination of assets that *could be in the way*.

47. (Holmes 2003), p. 170.

48. A notable exception to this is the recent turn of events in the Russo-Ukrainian war, where Russian forces have in many locations resorted to so-called "meat wave" tactics hearkening back to the Soviet era. Such tactics force Ukrainian defenders to target individual Russian combatants in large numbers, for the sole reason that Russian assaults are often exclusively or predominantly infantry-based and no longer rely on mechanized formations. See (Corera 2024).

49. Many thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this point to us.

3.3 Preserving Dignity

The above challenges to dignity have to do with general aspects of modern warfighting, and are not concerned with what weapons are being used, be they rifles, grenades, tanks, aircraft, or even autonomous and AI-enabled systems. The problem is simply that dignity, as construed by AWS critics, is out of place in modern warfare, and indeed, as Dieter Birnbacher clearly expresses,

> At least in theory, all of the features that make AWS appear to be problematic from the viewpoint of human dignity might be present in conventional acts of war.[50]

Many actions in war de-emphasize the intrinsic worth of humans, instead treating combatants *qua combatants* as obstacles to be overcome, and area attacks, which are commonplace, often pay little heed to the dignity of those in an area under fire (beyond the measure of respect captured by compliance with basic rules like distinction, necessity, precautions, and proportionality). To address these challenges, we must move away from the strict conception of dignity employed by AWS critics and instead look to a narrower understanding tailored to the realities of war.

A first observation of potential value is that "notions of human dignity and basic human rights are closely linked".[51] Warfare clearly creates tensions for many rights of both civilians and combatants (which, indeed, forms part of the problem with reliance on a strict understanding of dignity in war). However, though combatants have ceded a number of their basic *human* rights (such as the right not to be killed), they gain a number of *combatant* rights. These rights moreover point toward the delicate balance that must be struck in war between promoting all due respect to the humanity of one's enemies while still providing the necessary latitude for combatants to effectively conduct themselves in war. To return to a point made above, a conception of dignity which is operationalizable for use in war must be able to underpin and explain the distinction between the *combatancy* and *humanity* of an individual enemy soldier. It must explain and allow for the differences in how we treat our enemy *the combatant* and our enemy *the person*.[52]

As inflationary accounts of dignity raise numerous risks,[53] we will do our best to avoid these by eschewing presentation of a precise account of dignity in war. Instead, we will focus on the (1) underlying intuitions in the accounts of dignity so far explored, (2) the realities of war and how these create tension with (1), and (3) the rights and protections afforded to combatants as a matter of customary and treaty law, and partially embodying the terminology and intuitions of dignity itself. It should also be noted that the Martens Clause, a rule of customary IHL, extends protections derived "from the laws of humanity and the dictates of public conscience". Thus, even absent explicit IHL rulings, some legal rights and protections may be derived from "humanity" and "public conscience", carving out space for dignity as not just an ethical but also legal value limiting war.[54]

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50. (Birnbacher 2016), p. 119.
51. *Ibid*, p. 106.
52. The arguments developed here represent a condensed version of (Valle and Lara 2026).
53. (Birnbacher 2016), pp. 108–113.
54. It is worth noting that by appealing to "the laws of humanity" and "the dictates of public conscience", some argue that autonomous and AI-enabled weapons are inherently problematic (e.g., (Human Rights Watch 2012, 2018; Docherty 2018)). However, these arguments fail to address why autonomous and AI-enabled weapons at large run afoul of "the dictates of public conscience" when these weapons have been in use for decades.

To begin, the ethics and laws of war do recognize an intrinsic value of human beings worthy of protection. It is for this reason that the first Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions (AP I) lists as "*Basic Rules*" of war that

1. In any armed conflict, the right of the Parties to the conflict to choose methods or means of warfare is not unlimited.
2. It is prohibited to employ weapons, projectiles and material and methods of warfare of a nature to cause superfluous injury or unnecessary suffering.[55]

These protections clearly place upper constraints on what harms may be done to one's enemies, but they do not do so in a way that precludes harm, even lethal harm, nor in such a way that demands that enemies be treated as "ends in themselves" or in accordance with some particular conception of dignity. The second, and perhaps most important protection of IHL though is that afforded in AP I, Art. 41, which provides "*Safeguard of an enemy hors de combat*". Its core text reads that

1. A person who is recognized or who, in the circumstances, should be recognized to be *hors de combat* shall not be made the object of attack.
2. A person is *hors de combat* if:

   (a) he is in the power of an adverse Party;

   (b) he clearly expresses an intention to surrender; or

   (c) he has been rendered unconscious or is otherwise incapacitated by wounds or sickness, and therefore is incapable of defending himself;

   provided that in any of these cases he abstains from any hostile act and does not attempt to escape.

Due to their combatancy, there exist a host of actions that may be taken against one's enemies which do not treat them as ends in themselves or which implicitly or explicitly deemphasize their intrinsic worth and humanity. However, all of these actions are directed against *a combatant* and only incidentally at *a person*. And each combatant retains a fundamental right to shrug off their mantle of combatancy (subject to them genuinely and clearly surrendering)[56] at any time of their choosing. In doing so, they become immediately nontargetable and immediately gain the full protections of human dignity as found in peacetime.[57] The ability of combatants to eject the status which makes them targetable, and the attendant responsibility of others to respect such choices, forms a critical core component of dignity in war.

Critically, this is not a small thing. It takes serious institutional, doctrinal, and personal effort to show restraint toward enemies whom one is fighting, enemies who may be part of a force invading one's homeland, who may recently have tried to kill you,[58] or who may share allegiance with combatants who have been engaged in war crimes and crimes against humanity directed at one's fellow citizens. Fully complying with the rules governing conduct in war should not simply be taken for granted, and the level of restraint offered bears testament to an aspect of dignity which still can be found in war. The rules of war allow one to do great violence to an enemy, to ignore much of the worth *of combatants*, but they also

55. AP I, Art. 35.

56. For excellent unpacking of the nuances of "genuine" surrender and the limits of a combatant's ability to genuinely exercise their surrender rights, see the unpublished manuscript, "Surrender to Autonomous Weapons – A Philosophical Account", by Maciek Zając.

57. (Navon 2023) provides discussion of "peacetime dignity" and "wartime dignity" which fits well with the arguments being made here, substantiating these from the understanding of dignity within the Jewish tradition.

58. (Holmes 2003) provides many historical instances attesting to this fact.

demand that one recognize that each combatant is also *a person*. Respecting the dignity and intrinsic worth of that person does not mean combatants cannot be maimed or killed, but it does mean the moment they relinquish their combatant status (surrender) or have it taken from them (are rendered unconscious or otherwise incapacitated), they are treated with the respect due to them as "ends in themselves".[59]

The practice and respect of surrender thus presents a forceful rebuttal to Sparrow's critique that enemies are treated "like vermin". Given the military necessity of overcoming them, enemies who remain fighting may be subjected to summary and potentially lethal violence in their position *as enemies*, but unlike vermin, enemies can surrender. This is the critical distinction between killing in war and the exterminative killing of vermin or pests. Vermin cannot surrender, and even if they tried, they would likely not be respected.[60] But combatants can. The act of surrender and the possibility of it makes a combatant more than *just a combatant* and instead a human being deserving of respect.[61]

Expanding on this point and further connecting it to the current discussion of AWS, it is clear that AWS will have to be able to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate targets and be capable of recognizing and respecting surrender, or they must be deployed in such a limited way that technical limitations would not lead to problems. For example, restricting limited AWS so they may only target visibly armed individuals could mitigate risks by making it so combatants could simply drop their weapons to avoid being targeted.[62] If AWS do not have the capacity to recognize and respect surrender and are deployed without the restrictions necessary to avoid mistakes, this would be immoral and moreover illegal.[63] Furthermore, such deployments would arguably violate dignity, as a combatant's ability to surrender or otherwise control their own status is a critical aspect of their own dignity, and any system or practice which precludes them effectively exercising this power presents a serious impediment to dignity being respected. (Going forward, we will assume that AWS either are capable of recognizing and respecting surrenders or are limited in their deployments to render this concern moot.)[64]

Beyond the central principles regulating surrender, IHL admits numerous other protections rooted in and emblematic of the demands of dignity in war. Warring parties are required to, for example, search for the wounded and sick after engagements;[65] provide general assistance and medical support to the wounded, sick, and shipwrecked;[66] not target persons who have parachuted from aircraft in distress;[67] and guarantee general protections, humane treatment, and respect for the honor of prisoners.[68] Further, AP I, Art. 75 *Fundamental Guarantees*, specifically lists as "prohibited at any time and in any place whatsoever,

59. Notably, such respect is still tempered and limited by the realities of war, as prisoners of war (POW) are still denied a host of rights they in peacetime otherwise would have, and which, under normal circumstances, would be central elements of treating them with full respect (i.e., allowing them free movement, free association, etc.). This further underpins that "treating an individual as an end in themselves" during war cannot be the same as it is during peacetime. See also (Navon 2023).

60. As an aside though, there are ethical reasons to not slaughter vermin unless necessary. Minimization of violence and harm is always preferable when possible.

61. Very many thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting these highly insightful points.

62. Deployments to only aerial or naval combat, or only deploying anti-materiel systems represent further sensible deployment restrictions for limited AWS.

63. AP I, Art. 40–41.

64. As we are concerned with lawful parties to conflict, we assume that they will not be fielding systems which are expressly in violation of IHL. Such a "good faith" assumption is methodologically grounded in the consideration that any discussion of ethics in war presupposed we are engaging with lawful actors who actually have an interest in following the laws and ethics of war.

65. Geneva Convention I (GC I), Art. 15.

66. GC I–II, AP I, Part II.

67. AP I, Art. 42.

68. GC III, esp., Art. 13–14.

whether committed by civilian or by military agents... (b) outrages upon personal dignity". Dignity is thus threaded throughout IHL, and the rules of IHL, while not presenting a conception of dignity *per se*, do sharply illustrate what dignity demands in war. Moreover, those demands show that in order to generate objections to AWS, the strict conceptions utilized by critics have been inflated to such a degree that they no longer map to how dignity is understood in war.

In closing this section, we again highlight that the presentation here should by no means be viewed as a full account of dignity in war. We also stress that we have only canvassed some of the most conspicuous and impactful rules of war grounded in or meant to safeguard dignity, but our accounting should not be seen as exhaustive. We have, however, shown how basic rules of war ground basic concerns of dignity in a way that elevates respect for the intrinsic worth of humans to the greatest possible extent *given the realities of war*. Thus, while IHL is certainly not co-extensive with dignity in war and there will likely be moral concerns rooted in dignity which are omitted from the legal rules of war, the foundational principles of IHL sketch an already high standard for preserving, protecting, and promoting dignity in war. In the next section, we will examine how, in keeping with this operationalized view of the core demands of dignity, AWS and military AI may go beyond merely respecting dignity in war, but indeed potentially contribute to war being conducted in a way that is more sensitive to the underlying demands of dignity.

4. Autonomous and AI-Enabled Weapons, Dignity, and Respect

Warfare itself is a poor place to go looking for dignity, at least dignity as understood by AWS critics. However, we can take seriously the unfortunate realities of war and make sense of a narrower conception which focuses on the respect and deference that combatants can genuinely demand of their enemies, the rights and duties flowing from dignity and encapsulated in international humanitarian law. Taking IHL as our broad guide to dignity in war, we can also, *pace* critics of autonomous and AI-enabled weapons, find ways for these emerging technologies to not just respect, but indeed bolster and improve our (potential) respect for combatants' dignity.[69][70]

4.1 Decision-Making in War: From "Jarheads" to Judge Advocates

The deployment of autonomous and AI-enabled weapon systems is apt to shift many (lethal) decisions made by humans out of the heat of combat, and into the comparatively quieter space of deployment choices. Thus, rather than individual combatants taking aim and firing, AWS deployers will be deciding before a deployment what levels of force are to be utilized. This allows them to take a more cautious approach, carefully considering the humanity of their enemies and the attendant demands of respect and dignity which that human-

69. One may question why our arguments appeal to IHL rather than to just war theory (JWT). This is based on numerous reasons, and full exposition of them is unfortunately far beyond the scope of this work. For brevity, we will give two broadly pragmatic motivations for this choice, that (i) IHL is nearly universally agreed upon, with numerous core principles being deemed customary law binding on all states (even non-signatories), whereas JWT sees intense debates on every single principle and position, no matter how large or small, and (ii) IHL serves as a stable guide to conduct in war which has successfully mitigated the harms of war for decades and anchored core moral values despite the extremely hazardous and fraught realities of states and peoples in conflict. Protections rooted in IHL are thus apt to be far more stable and reflective of the broad moral and legal consensus, whereas JWT views can be highly particular to specific moral theories, outlooks, or narrow philosophical foundations.

70. Importantly, the arguments here are not intended to show that these technologies *will* lead to this, only that they *can*. Whether AWS and AI-enabled systems actually contribute to respecting dignity critically depends on how these technologies are deployed by militaries.

ity entails. This point alone can serve to make autonomous and AI-enabled weapons much more conducive to respect for dignity in warfare.[71]

A large portion of the ethical and legal decision-making in deployments of AWS will involve the setting of deployment parameters, target profiles, geo-temporal limits on AWS engagements, etc.[72] These human-set limitations will, in most cases, have to be set before a deployment even begins. And they will usually have to be considered within the more sterile and calm environments of bases or headquarters (as opposed to active combat zones). Because of this, the broad human limitations which often lead to mistakes and malicious acts in war (e.g., fatigue, confusion, anger, etc.) can be largely stripped from the situation. That being said, it is important to note that while military headquarters may generally present less stressful environments for decision-making, or implicate a set of individuals with a better state of mind for making hard decisions, headquarters can still be highly stressful, and commanders may also be suffering from fatigue, persistent stress, or emotional unrest due to the loss of comrades or subordinates. Thus, we should not expect any decisions in war to be made in what might be seen as "optimal" conditions. However, even granting these limitations, it can be plausibly assumed that commanders and personnel in rear bases will, on average, be in a better state of mind to make decisions well. On its own, this makes it likely that acts violating the dignity of both combatants and civilians may become less likely through the use of AWS, simply in virtue of taking the more tired, worn-down, and potentially angry combatants out of the decision space for many combat activities.

Additionally, individuals setting deployment parameters, target profiles, and geo-temporal limits to AWS deployments will be able to benefit from the wisdom, knowledge, and advice of military professionals well-versed in the demands of IHL.[73] In "up close" warfighting, those involved will often be young men (i.e., aged 18-24) who have less access to military lawyers or clergy/ethics professionals who could provide advice. But decisions about target profiles and limitations to weapons release will usually be made in settings where precisely those individuals can be found. These latter professionals are also by and large older and more mature than rank-and-file combatants, they are more experienced in a general sense, and they possess far more knowledge and certainty about the contours and demands of both the ethics and, more importantly, the laws of war. Military lawyers, or Staff Judge Advocates (JAs), are thus in a far better position to know precisely what duties soldiers have toward enemy combatants, what they may and must do to and for them, and how one can reasonably try to limit the harm of war while still achieving one's aims. JAs are also less likely to suffer from any number of factors which might limit other combatants' judgment (e.g., fatigue, anger, etc.), they are liable to in general do a better job of carefully examining a planned operation and determining how much force is permitted by IHL and the mission at hand, and they may be in a better position to recognize what forms of mercy or harm mitigation may be possible. This does not mean that JAs will necessarily advise that more restrictive or conservative targeting parameters be set, or that deployments be less bloody or respectful of enemy combatants' dignity, but it does demonstrate that such professionals are at least in a *better position* to do so. Moreover, as autonomous systems may be far more attritable than human combatants, JAs may also reasonably advise that these be put at more risk in order to respect combatants' dignity, something that human combatatants in a war zone cannot reasonably be expected to do.

71. See (Arkin 2009, 2010) for similar arguments.
72. For further discussion of these points, see, e.g., (Homayounnejad 2018; Kwik 2024; Trabucco 2025a, 2025b).
73. (Trabucco 2025a).

As a brief point of caution, it is worth stating clearly that military lawyers will not always be advising for maximally restrictive constraints, and depending on the context, they may sometimes establish looser constraints to enable a commander maximum flexibility under the law. This is an important reality to bear in mind, but one which does not necessarily imply a departure from ethical considerations (flexibility is sometimes operationally and ethically necessary, as highly fluid combat environments may demand that commanders have broad latitude to alter operations or parameters to fit the changing realities on the ground). Awareness that JAs may sometimes set permissive constraints is a critical first step in finding ways to curtail such actions or ensure they are only done in connection with genuine military necessity. And even granting this potential limitation, it is still clearly the case that military lawyers will be, on average, in a better position to advise caution, conservatism, and constraint.[74]

Related to this, one must also be cognizant of the fact that JAs don't always get things right, with rules of engagement (ROEs) sometimes seeming sensible from the (relative) comfort of divisional headquarters, but in reality turning out to be ambiguous, confusing, or unhelpfully limited for combatants operating on the ground. With human combatants, such failures are addressed through human judgment. But AWS lack such judgment, a fact which motivates many critics of these systems.[75] This is a limitation that must be borne in mind, but it is not one which necessarily implies that such systems cannot be used well, or could not be used in a way that protects and promotes dignity as much or more than human combatants can (and do).[76] It does however indicate that rules, parameters, and deployment specifications must be carefully considered and ideally set in a maximally conservative way, given that computerized systems are liable to find every loophole or overlooked factor and potentially exploit these to deadly effect. More care is thus necessary before deployment, but on the other hand, such systems may then also be less able to act unpredictably or in unwanted ways, something human combatants can always do, and for reasons which are always opaque. AWS thus raise an additional challenge pre-deployment, but create an opportunity for potentially heightened predictability during deployment.

Finally, the fact that much of the ethical and legal legwork in responsibly deploying AWS and AI-enabled systems takes place through the setting of parameters and operational limitations for deployed systems,[77] there is the further potential benefit that militaries can, before systems are even moved to theaters of conflict, demand certain design decisions be made which foster respect for dignity (and other principles) in war. For example, making it so that systems cannot be deployed until explicit temporal and geographic limitations have been set for a deployment forces decision-makers to consider exactly where and when AWS are needed, and to consider if there are perhaps more apposite times and places for the desired mission to be undertaken. Creating systems that provide collateral damage assessments based on the best intelligence had at the time can also furnish JAs with useful information in determining the limits of legal and ethical deployments. As the decision to deploy AWS will almost always allow for some reasonable time to deliberate and not demand split-second responses, design elements that force individuals to reconsider variables may also prove to be a valuable feature.[78] In any case, while no individual design choice will ensure

74. Many thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing this point.

75. Such critiques or ones similar can be found in almost every AWS-critical source cited in this work.

76. There are also grounds to be skeptical of how much we read into "the human" component and what it actually means for these arguments. See, e.g., (Heller 2023).

77. It is worth clarifying here that we assume commanders and combatants possess the requisite understanding of the technologies and systems at their disposal that they can recognize their limitations, vulnerabilities, and potential for bringing about unwanted consequences if carelessly deployed.

that uses of AWS are IHL-compliant or compliant with the demands of dignity – that adjudication depends centrally on the choices humans make regarding deployments – there are many design choices which can further entrench the value of dignity and push deployers and decision-makers to consider it when planning operations.

4.2 "This engagement is being recorded."

The second potential benefit of autonomous and AI-enabled systems, in terms of promoting dignity in war, is rooted in the fact that such systems will by necessity be outfitted with an array of sensor apparatuses, likely covering a variety of types of information (visual, audio, radar, etc.). AWS critics often (implicitly or explicitly) portray systems which are akin to modern-day Golem, where operators are completely disengaged from operations once a system has been programmed and launched. Yet the reality is that, with a battery of multimodal sensors on board, there is no reason why all this information could not be made available to deployers. This could be done by AWS transmitting full mission data being gathered during deployment or, in communications denied environments, by means of a recoverable "black box" that records all data, and cannot be tampered with. In addition to recording the data gathered during a mission, systems could also be designed to record all aspects of a mission profile: target profiles, lists of concrete targets (for discrete pre-planned strikes), geo-temporal limitations, and other deployment limitations/parameters. Finally, an often overlooked fact is that current systems can seldom be considered as single isolated pieces of equipment operating alone, and operators can often regain overwatch of a mission by relying on external systems such as satellites or surveillance aircraft, providing additional means to monitor a theater of operations, and offering an additional potential prerequisite to launching attacks utilizing fully autonomous systems.

With a full accounting of what precautions mission planners put in place and what the AWS actually encountered during deployment, it becomes far more possible to determine whether military actions are being undertaken with the due care required by the ethics and laws of war.[79] More than this, when human combatants are engaged in combat, there is both less information overall about their decision-making, and, by necessity, there must be more latitude granted for judgment, given that these individuals are forced to make split-second life-and-death decisions. Yet decisions about AWS deployments will, per the previous section, be made in relatively sterile environments where planners can be careful and thoughtful in their assessments.[80] Because of this, we may expect them to take more care, and deployment parameters ought to reflect that. At the very least, having a clear record of what precautions are put in place for a deployment gives a clear picture from which one may better judge the permissibility of that deployment.

These factors allow for a strong *ex post* check on potential violations of ethical and legal concerns in war, violations of (combatant) dignity among them, but they also through this place an *ex ante* pressure on planners to do their jobs well and conscientiously. When planners know that their decisions are being recorded and are liable to be reviewed after a mission's completion, they have strong incentives to do their jobs well. By doing their jobs as

78. E.g., specific frictions (colors, messages, assistance delays, etc.) might be built into the user interface to break the flow of actions, mitigating the potential for operators to fall prey to automation bias. For recent work exploring similar ideas, see (Veluwenkamp and Buijsman 2025).

79. (Simpson and Müller 2015).

80. As noted already, and worth reiterating again, this possibility created by AWS use does not mean states or militaries actually make use of that possibility. There is ample evidence of, for example, Israeli Defense Forces making use of autonomous and AI-enabled systems to speed targeting cycles, resulting in grossly disproportionate strikes which also very likely violated principles of distinction and precautions, due to operators being given very narrow windows for approving targets nominated by AI-enabled systems. See, e.g., (Kozlovski 2024; Mimran et al. 2024).

responsibly as possible in all instances, this may further lead to a habitual understanding of the demands of ethics and law, including the demands of dignity. For human combatants engaged in combat, on the other hand, we can do our best to instill martial virtues and ethical values that would lead them to act well during fighting, but no amount of training or education can guarantee how they will behave once in combat. The use of AWS may thus allow for a potentially more robust respect for dignity in war.

Finally, it is worth noting that while much of the discussion in this section has focused more on the dignity of combatants specifically, the arguments here point just as aptly to how AWS can promote dignity generally. By forcing decision-makers to plan missions more carefully, they are also enjoined to consider the cost of their actions for civilians caught in war zones as well. Moreover, the need to carefully determine the exact geographic and temporal limits for AWS deployments allows them to restrict violent action to highly localized times and places, providing a further means to respect the dignity of all who suffer the scourges of war. Mission planners may still make mistakes though, and none of this is to say that the use of AWS or AI-enabled systems will necessarily foster dignity in war. However, it shows that these open a possibility which is not present when soldiers fight "up close and personal", or when they use over-the-horizon fires to target their enemies. By incorporating ever more sophisticated autonomous and AI-enabled systems into our militaries, we create opportunities to develop fighting forces which are more discriminate and respecting of our deepest moral values.

5. Conclusion: Dignity's Limits

In closing, it should be noted that dignity-based objections to AWS and military uses of AI rest on a fundamental assumption that by not using such weapons, we can treat our enemies with the dignity they deserve. However, as argued above, this is almost certainly not the case, at least not under the critics' conception of dignity and for the majority of weapons and tactics used in modern warfare. Artillery barrages, bombing campaigns, and other long-range attacks often treat our enemies, at best, as obstacles to be overcome. Area attacks are often not even directed at individual soldiers (instead hitting grid coordinates), and so cannot treat individual soldiers with the respect they deserve as human beings, as the purpose of the attack is not to kill *this* or *that* combatant, but rather to "clear" or "sweep" an area, euphemistic language which is also rather accurate; artillerymen are often not aiming to kill individuals, they are aiming to scour a space. The dignity-based objection to AWS and military AI thus rests on a fundamental misunderstanding regarding the realities of war, assuming that we can treat our enemies according to a strict conception of dignity while trying to kill them based on nothing other than national allegiance or present location. This is not the case.

Responding to this reality, we argued for a narrower sense of dignity fitting the realities and accepted practices of war, and anchored in the host of rights and duties of those who take up the mantle of war. This conception of dignity can be respected in war, and can, as argued above, be respected even when using autonomous and AI-enabled weapon systems. Moreover, the use of such systems will not only *not* exacerbate challenges to dignity inherent in war, but may even create means for us to recapture a larger share of that value. By shifting decision-making further from the line of contact, involving legal and ethical professionals more competent to assess the demands of IHL and dignity when deploying AWS, and by obtaining and retaining records of all engagements, we create means and incentives for dignity to be given more respect. And that holds not only for the narrower conception of dignity advocated, but for a broader concern of human dignity as well.

Whether or not dignity really is fostered through the use of such systems is not simply a question of design or capability though, and centrally hinges on exactly how militaries incorporate these emerging technologies into their existing structures and make use of them in concrete warfighting scenarios. It is thus incumbent on us to do our best to constantly advocate for conscientious design and development of appropriate technologies, as well as for the responsible and effective use of these systems, highlighting both their challenges and potential benefits with an eye to addressing the many worries they raise.

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