Towards a Feminist Ethic of War: Proposing a Critical Feminist Framework for Investigating the Ethics of Contemporary Warfare

Jillian Terry, Department of International Relations, London School of Economics
j.a.terry@lse.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper outlines a critical feminist framework of the ethics of war in order to provide insights into the ethical complexities of twenty-first century political violence. Following from feminist engagements with just war theory, this paper argues that feminist IR scholarship to date has not adequately defined an ethical framework for understanding war that provides a flexible and reflexive way of making claims about the ethical acceptability of political violence in particular post-9/11 contexts. In an attempt to address this silence, the framework outlined in this paper prioritizes understandings of concepts that have been brought forth by existing literatures in feminist ethics, including discussion of four main ethical concepts that are argued to be particularly salient in discussions of contemporary warfare: relationality, responsibility, empathy, and experience. It is the aim of this paper to argue in support of a framework that foregrounds these ethical principles in order for feminist scholarship on the ethics of war to make substantive contributions to ethical judgement and arguments surrounding the morality of contemporary warfare practices such as drone warfare and private military contracting.

Introduction

Debates about the ethics of war are among the oldest in the field of International Relations (IR). Despite interventions from a wide variety of theoretical perspectives, however, feminist contributions to what should inform our ethical judgments of the acceptability of political violence remain largely marginalized from mainstream accounts in the discipline. One potential reason for the resistance among existing ethics of war scholars in IR to engage with feminist analyses is the cacophony of voices and diverse perspectives within feminist scholarship on this issue. Tensions existing between pacifist and non-pacifist feminists as well as multiple approaches to conceiving of the ethics of war among non-pacifists have resulted in a multiplicity of sometimes-contradictory ethical principles for determining when violence is morally acceptable as a means to achieving peace. This paper provides an overview of these approaches and principles in an attempt to uncover what feminisms have said about the ethics of political violence to date and suggest ways forward for feminist ethicists in IR. In so doing, the first section lays much of the necessary groundwork for a theoretical framework which attempts to demonstrate the usefulness of feminist ethics in analysing contemporary warfare practices such as drone technology and the use of private military contractors, as well as identifies arguments in support of a cohesive feminist ethic of war.

In unpacking feminist understandings of the ethics of peace and war, this paper makes use of multiple feminisms. While I acknowledge the distinctions among various approaches to feminist thought, for the purposes of this paper I propose an inclusive and emancipatory set of feminisms that takes into account a multiplicity of feminist interpretations. Further, I take notions of gendered power, gender inequalities, and the maintenance of patriarchy to suggest not only oppression through physical and social means, but also the reproduction of such oppressions in discourse and performative elements of gender. This feminist framework is both flexible and reflexive, and can be identified as “feminist knowledge…as a part of a constructive and collaborative solidarist academic and activist project.”¹ In sum, the paper

attempts to make contributions to feminist IR understandings of ethics and war and to clarify what types of principles it has espoused to date. As Sylvester suggests, “by considering factors and holding ethical views that are generally invisible to political study or practice, feminisms add disorder to others that appear tidy because of their exclusiveness.”

This paper highlights the nature of that disorder and critically interrogates its achievements and silences in order to develop some possible future paths for the development of a feminist ethic of war.

The paper begins by rethinking the so-called ‘inherent’ connections between feminism and pacifism, and then unpacks how feminists to date have theorized ethics and war – through notions of care, just war theory, and alternative approaches underpinned by notions of justice, narrative, and experience. I pay particular attention to Laura Sjoberg’s feminist reformulation of just war and point out the ways in which feminist ethics has succeeded and failed in responding to the problematic elements of the just war tradition. The paper then highlights some of the limitations with existing feminist perspectives on the ethics of political violence, before the final section constructs a critical feminist ethical framework for thinking about the moral justifications of contemporary warfare that responds to these gaps as well as those persisting in the just war tradition. The framework advocates for the centrality of ethical considerations based around relationality, experience, empathy, and responsibility in rethinking contemporary warfare, suggesting the need for a critical re-reading of the ethics of these practices using this framework – an issue to be taken up in further research.

Rethinking the Feminism-Pacifism Connection

A significant body of work by feminists examining the nature of ethics in war and its relationship to gender is strongly anchored in pacifist traditions. By advocating for peace, this segment of feminist scholarship has highlighted the frameworks of oppression and subordination that they argue are inherent in warfare and violent conflict. Such arguments are premised on the position that since these frameworks are built and sustained through notions of gender inequality and patriarchy, the linkages between war and gender subordination mean that war and violent conflict are always unacceptable. This conclusion is problematic for several reasons. As Sjoberg suggests, “a theory of politics that eschews violence would be incomplete without a theory of justice in and of war”. That is, in order for feminist IR theorists to present an inclusive argument against political violence that recognizes practical realities, it is necessary to think through notions of justice and the ethical judgements made about war and conflict around the world. To ignore the theoretical complexities of these notions is to emphasize an impoverished understanding of international politics, particularly as it pertains to war and peace. While the feminist pacifist tradition offers useful insights into how we might begin to realize peaceful resolution to international conflict, Sjoberg’s contribution helpfully points out the dangers of failing to fully recognize the importance of thinking about justice and the ethics of political violence when condemning such violence outright.

This section first attempts to sketch out the existing debates amongst feminists regarding the acceptability of political violence, and identifies the “two distinct attitudes within feminist thought” with respect to the ethics of violence in war and conflict. I will then articulate the specific problems with the pacifist line of feminist argument as they relate to the construction of a feminist ethic of war, and argue that it is necessary for feminist IR

scholarship to move beyond such restrictive linkages between feminism and pacifism in order to adequately address the ethical challenges presented when using gender as a key tool for analysing political violence.

In *Sexism and the War System*, Betty Reardon argues against the possibility of ethical war from a feminist perspective by identifying what she sees as fundamental connections between violence and sexism that create inherent linkages between feminism and pacifism.\(^5\) This early example of feminist scholarship that constructs feminism and pacifism as intrinsically linked and permanently intertwined informs one side of the debate over the acceptability of political violence – for Reardon and others, pacifist ethics is the only ethics to be espoused by feminist thought, as it is impossible to conceive of a type of violence that is not imbued with notions of sexism in the form of oppression and subordination. A special issue of *Hypatia* published in 1994\(^6\) provides additional voices of support for this absolute commitment to pacifism from feminists studying war. Warren and Cady point out the various types of connections between feminism and pacifism, from conceptual and empirical linkages to historical, linguistic, and psychological associations.\(^7\) For them, an analysis of war from a feminist perspective that does not concern itself primarily with these connections to peace is incomplete - their use of historical empirical examples demonstrating the disproportionately negative impact of war on women including the use of rape as weapon of war is meant to provide evidence against the possibility of war deemed acceptable by feminists. In the same issue, Barbara Andrew highlights how she sees the social construction of gender as promoting and participating in the psychological conditions that are necessary for war. Using the work of Wollstonecraft and Woolf, Andrew argues that the roots of oppression exist in the ‘private tyranny’ of the patriarchal family structure, which leads to the ‘public tyranny’ of war enacted by the masculinised soldier.\(^8\) While this connection between particular constructions of masculinity and femininity and the nature of soldiers in war is an important one, Andrew employs it to make an outright critique of war from a pacifist feminist perspective. As will be evidenced later in this section, this restrictive approach to analysing the relationship between war and peace actually serves to limit the insights that feminist understandings can bring to bear on the nature of violent conflict and war. As has been suggested by critics of the pacifist feminist tradition, a more holistic account of war practices that acknowledges the atrocities of war and desire for peace while still providing space for contexts in which war may be an acceptable - or indeed, the only - response in order to solve a particular conflict is a desirable use of the unique theoretical and analytical insights of feminist perspectives on international politics. As Aroussi rightfully points out, the essentializing arguments put forward by some feminist pacifists equating femininity with peace may have serious negative repercussions for women’s equality as well as international peace and security, as such gendered dichotomies both limit women’s access to arenas where important decisions are made about political violence and serve to sustain militarism.\(^9\)

Sara Ruddick’s work is an example of scholarship that has been inspired by an understanding of a pacifist ethic and commitment to nonviolence while remaining open to the necessity of war in particular circumstances. In her critique of militarism, Ruddick appeals to motherhood and practices of mothering to argue that women’s role as mothers makes them

---


\(^6\) “Special Issue: Feminism and Peace.” (1994). *Hypatia* 9(2), 1-244.


inherently interested in peace, and the distinctive virtues embodied in motherhood highlight the gendered nature of power relationships that are reproduced on the battlefield of war.\textsuperscript{10} However, she goes on to suggest that while all acts of political violence need to be critically and suspiciously examined, it is not useful to absolutely forbid the use of violence as a means to end oppression.\textsuperscript{11} This unsettled question of violence versus peace as evidenced in Ruddick’s work demonstrates the significant tension within feminist scholarship regarding the ethical appraisal of acts of war – a tension that remains in place decades after the publication of \textit{Maternal Thinking}. As Hutchings rightfully suggests, Ruddick’s argument represents the affirmation of a question rather than an answer to this tension, as it “confirms the dilemmas feminists face in the judgment of political violence, but it doesn’t solve them. For some feminists, both pacifist and nonpacifist, this represents an evasion of the question of political violence.”\textsuperscript{12}

Another attempt to answer such questions about feminist attitudes towards political violence comes in the form of pacifist feminist work which suggests that the renunciation of war and violent conflict can be used as a political tool. In her historical examination of the connections between women and peace, Carroll advocates for women to play an important role as peace activists while resisting gender subordination by men that places them in the role of ‘natural peacemaker’ because peace is so ‘typically feminine’.\textsuperscript{13} She suggests that while it is acceptable for feminists to question the male monopoly of violence, it is a more useful and important task for women to take peace activism as a preferred political choice in order to question the use of violence itself.\textsuperscript{14} Like Ruddick, Carroll and others espousing the use of peace as a feminist political tool walk the line between a full-blown commitment to nonviolence and a tentative acceptance of political violence as a highly contingent and contextual means to ending oppressive situations. This shifting ground of feminist pacifism highlights the extent to which linkages between peace and femininity have been embedded in our social consciousness, leading to problematic assumptions when articulating feminist perspectives of war. It remains difficult for feminist theorists of peace to avoid falling into the essentialist trap of gendered dichotomies when advocating for peaceful resolutions to political disputes, and the permeation of such dichotomies into our understandings of men, women, war, and peace suggests that it remains an important area of investigation for feminist scholarship.

In \textit{Gender, Justice, and the Wars in Iraq}, Laura Sjoberg identifies what she sees as the three major problems of pacifism for feminist thought and the ethics of war: complex definitions of peace, a denial of women’s agency, and the allowance of remaining human suffering.\textsuperscript{15} While I agree that these are three significant difficulties with the feminist pacifist perspective, I would add the tendency for pacifist thought to rely on traditional false dichotomies – such as those of masculine/feminine and peace/war – as an additional challenge presented by pacifist understandings. When combined, I argue that these problems make it virtually impossible for feminist perspectives on war which are wholly committed to peace and nonviolence to substantively contribute to the way feminists understand the ethics of political violence in the twenty-first century.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 138.
\textsuperscript{12} Hutchings, K. (2007), 114.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 11.
\textsuperscript{15} Sjoberg, L. (2006), 10.
The complex task of defining peace presents an enormous challenge to feminists attempting to understand war within a context of nonviolence and pacifism. As Sjoberg rightfully points out, conceptions of peace vary widely by culture and context, and exist in both positive and negative senses – positive peace being the enjoyment of full security and justice in politics, and negative peace being the absence of armed conflict. Similarly, Tuzin highlights the often contradictory nature of definitions of peace within the large body of peace scholarship, noting that the literature has failed to adequately examine its definitions of the term and the definitions it does give are largely unreflective. Within feminist scholarship, some attention has been given to this problem, especially to shed light on the marginalization of women’s voices in existing debates about the nature of peace. However, it remains the case the much of the work in feminist pacifism fails to take into consideration the many complexities of defining peace, instead settling on a definition that is too highly contingent to accurately describe a goal or set of goals for a feminist ethic of nonviolence.

While the ideal of positive peace is a significant one, it cannot be the only contribution to the way feminists construct an ethic of war. It is unlikely that any feminist would disagree that the insecurities and injustices felt by victims of war (both women and men) are abhorrent and should be avoided at all costs; however, to fully exclude the possibility of political violence as a means to achieving peace obscures the nature of international politics and oversimplifies the difficulties in conceiving of a positive peace in the face of intense oppressions. In order to engage in more fruitful analyses, it is necessary for feminist work in peace to recognize peace not only as a process (rather than a state or outcome) but as often existing simultaneously in parallel to political violence. Unpacking the relationship between peace and war through an improved understanding of the processual nature of political violence rather than excluding war completely from feminist pacifist analyses would undoubtedly provide us with more useful insights into the ways in which processes of both peace and war can be (in)just, (un)ethical, and deeply gendered.

The association between feminism and pacifism is also problematic because it denies women the agency to choose political alternatives. This loss of agency is due in large part to the general tendency to consider women as a homogenous group of advocates for peace, making it difficult for them to assert a position that supports political violence without being considered ‘unwomanly’ or seen as rejecting their femininity. As Sjoberg suggests, the permeation of this linkage into the way women and war are understood results in the relationship being overdetermined. While Sjoberg sees this problem as being rooted in the continued reliance on traditional dichotomies, I suggest that that issue deserves its own discussion as a problem of feminist pacifist thought. Rather, I see the disappearance of women’s agency as resulting from the tendency in both academic and practical circles to relegate women’s voices to the margins of discussions about conflict resolution. Because notions of women, feminism, and peace have become so intrinsically linked, non-feminist scholars and practitioners alike now automatically assume that a feminist voice on the subject of war will advocate exclusively for peace, leaving women little opportunity to suggest otherwise. This lack of agency means that when women do advocate for political violence in

---

16 Ibid., 10.
order to achieve peace, they are seen as somehow defying their inherent peaceful virtues and are labelled unfeminine, again othering them to an arena outside the important decision-making of international security concerns. In other words, “if women are supposed to be peaceful, they do not get to choose between war and peace; peace is chosen for them”.21 While the traditional or stereotypical views of women by those outside the feminist pacifist tradition do not accurately represent the views of feminist pacifist scholars in most cases, these misconceptions nevertheless make it increasingly difficult for feminists working in the pacifist tradition to engage in fruitful intellectual debate and activism with those outside the field. As Sjoberg rightfully points out, this perceived loss of agency is highly detrimental to the feminist project as a whole, and represents a significant problem with thinking about a feminist ethic of war from a perspective of pacifism.22

The last problem with feminist pacifist thought as outlined by Sjoberg is the notion that if feminism is to support peace and nonviolence exclusively, it also must therefore accept and allow remaining human suffering.23 Of course, this poses a moral and ethical dilemma – if war is ruled out as a possibility for correcting the world’s injustices, then it follows that feminist pacifists see war as the ultimate moral evil. Such an absolute depiction of the evils and injustices of the world obscures the complex realities of political circumstances on the ground, and while it is certainly not the case that the only solutions to injustice are violent ones, the inverse – that pacifism should always override every decision about the use of political violence – is unrealistic and untenable given the behaviour of international political actors. Sjoberg helpfully points out that “most political actors must weigh comparative rather than absolute justice”.24 Given the nature of such comparison, it follows that a less absolute approach to the ethics of war would be helpful to a feminist perspective of anti-violence. By removing the hard-line conceptions of justice and violence in international politics from the feminist pacifist tradition, we do not open the floodgates for constant war; rather, an increasingly relative and nuanced approach to the complex ‘goods’ and ‘evils’ of the world allows us to come closer to an approximated version of what all feminists, whether pacifist or non-pacifist, aspire to – a world without any human suffering at all.

While Sjoberg partially addresses the feminist pacifist problem of reliance on traditional false dichotomies in her discussion of women’s agency, I believe it merits further discussion as a substantive difficulty of the pacifist approach on its own. Firstly, the issue of absolute thinking again appears as feminist pacifists tend to see international political conflicts in terms of either war or peace. They advocate for peace on the grounds that all war is inherently imbued with notions of gender oppression and subordination and is therefore unethical in any circumstance. However, such an approach fails to substantively recognize war as a process, a reality that feminist IR scholars examining war and political violence have paid close attention to in recent years.25 While the feminist pacifist tradition does draw attention to the existence of a continuum of violence – that is, the violence of the state against women and other marginalized groups during supposed ‘peacetime’ that may transition into political violence or war – its resistance to engagement with the potential usefulness of violence in particular situations results in a continued reliance on the notion of peace as the only possible goal. The false dichotomy of war and peace must be broken down and the cyclical and continuous nature of political violence exposed, particularly in the contemporary period. Similarly, it is not possible to delineate particular spaces as war-torn or peaceful in

21 Ibid., 10. (emphasis in original)
22 Ibid., 10.
23 Ibid., 11.
24 Ibid., 11. (emphasis in original)
times of conflict. As Kirsch and Flint suggest, “to identify and interrogate the false dichotomy between war and peace...it is useful to consider places and political spaces, such as nation-states or ‘war-zones’, as socially constructed”. As the large body of work in IR examining pre- and post-conflict societies suggests, processes of warfare occur daily around the world in various types of environments, whether or not a country is officially ‘at war’.

These processes should be (and are) of particular concern to feminists as women often bear much of the burden caused by ‘unofficial’ warfare practices, including a lack of infrastructure, the decimation of male populations, and wartime sexual violence. These phenomena all constitute tactics of war, despite the fact that they can occur both before and long after any official fighting has taken place. Their existence is obscured because such practices often occur in so-called ‘private’ spaces of the household; nevertheless, uncovering them serves to highlight the invalidity of the war/peace dichotomy that relies on the absolute separation of war and peace in order to continually advocate for peace and condemn war. As Peach suggests, “a feminist just war theorist, like a pacifist, sees war as morally wrong; unlike a pacifist, (s)he thinks it can sometimes be justifiable in the face of greater moral evil”. This inflexibility on the part of feminist pacifists suggests a continued reliance on the war/peace dichotomy that serves to limit the potential usefulness of a pacifist approach to understanding political violence.

The dichotomy of masculinity/femininity is also employed by feminist pacifists in a problematic manner. As Burguieres rightfully suggests, a feminist approach to peace that appeals to gender stereotypes “is still predominant in the thinking of many feminists who write, speak and work for peace. Typically, they build arguments around ideas of feminine and masculine values which correspond to the traditional stereotypes of men and women”. While some work in the feminist pacifist tradition has appealed to women’s so-called ‘natural’ inclination towards peace – due to their socialization into traditional gender roles or their biological role as mothers, for example – this use of traditional or stereotypical views of men and women serves to reify the same dichotomous understandings of gender that serve to produce and maintain patriarchy and gender inequality in society. As Tickner suggests, “the association of femininity with peace lends support to an idealized masculinity that depends on constructing women as passive victims in need of protection”. By positioning women as victims and men as heroes, emphasising a link between feminism and pacifism serves to perpetuate the image of a masculinized warrior soldier that is a significant component of the gendered nature of militarism and war. The dependence on this false dichotomy of masculine/feminine by feminist pacifists who espouse understandings of men as inherently aggressive or violent and women as inherently peaceful and nurturing therefore actually undermines the feminist project of ameliorating women’s position in global society by defending gender equality, and is highly problematic for the construction of a feminist ethic of war.

Having outlined the feminist pacifist line of argument and identified the major difficulties of such a position for feminist understandings of war, the question we are left with is: if not peace, then what? Of course, a feminist position on the ethics of war is not to advocate for political violence without having considered and attempted any possible type of

peaceful, nonviolent resolution. Rather, it is to recognize that in order to attain an approximation of peace\textsuperscript{30} – not a perfect, wholly positive, idealized peace but a realistic version of peaceful life – violence may sometimes be necessary, though not desirable. It is a calculation of the costs of war versus the suffering of civilians if a particular set of oppressive circumstances were to continue, and an acknowledgement of the complexities of war as a process. An ethics of war informed by non-pacifist feminist analysis takes into consideration not only the contextual particularities of political situations but also the variety of ways in which political violence can be employed. For instance, while a feminist ethic of war may argue that combat between militaries is morally acceptable in order to overcome an oppressive force, the use of rape as a weapon of war is likely to be judged as immoral and unacceptable regardless of the circumstance due to the significant harms it causes to already marginalized civilian populations (women and children).

Like feminist pacifists, feminist perspectives on war and political violence recognize the significant moral problems with war; however, unlike pacifists, they believe that it is possible in certain specific instances to justify war in the face of a greater immorality.\textsuperscript{31} This distinction serves as the crux of the ongoing debate within feminist thought over the acceptability of political violence, but it does not provide us with a complete picture of what a feminist ethic of war should look like. As the diversity of existing literature suggests, non-pacifist feminists have not defined a singular ethic of war deemed feminist in nature. Rather, there exist multiple feminist perspectives on the ethics of war, from those concerned with an ethic of care and the body to the scholarship attempting to reformulate just war theory through a feminist lens. This multiplicity of feminist interpretations of what is ethical in war is representative of the ways in which feminism operates more broadly, particularly in IR. In its attempts to destabilize dominant discourses of international politics, feminist IR analysis has presented a variety of scholarship examining the difficult relationship between war and ethics, exposing gendered silences which are otherwise obscured by mainstream theoretical perspectives in the discipline. While it is therefore useful to have such a rich body of literature from which feminists can draw when conducting investigations into the moral acceptability of political violence, it is nevertheless important to interrogate the quality of existing work, particularly as to whether it remains trapped within particular gendered understandings of war that have been employed in the male-dominated sphere of international security. The following section attempts to elucidate the dominant strands of feminist scholarship examining the ethics of war through a critical lens, and presents some initial thoughts on ways in which feminist scholars may construct a more robust feminist ethic of war than what currently exists in the literature.

### Feminist Understandings of the Ethics of War

While the work of feminist pacifists has certainly contributed to the discussions of war amongst early feminist IR scholars, a more recent body of research suggests that feminist scholarship does indeed argue for the use of political violence in order to achieve specific goals under certain circumstances, in both inter- and intra-state contexts. For the purposes of this analysis, I take Hutchings’ definition of political violence as referring to “collective practices of physical violence (killing and injury) in the public sphere directed towards

\textsuperscript{30} While Sjoberg (2006) employs Galtung (1975) to describe a “series of imperfect peace[s]” (11), I prefer to identify a set of conditions whereby populations are largely free from insecurity and have some semblance of justice present in their everyday lives as an ‘approximation of peace’, acknowledging its resemblance to the nebulous ‘peace’ described in scholarly literature as opposed to highlighting its flaws or weaknesses.

political ends, such as war, revolutionary violence, and terrorism”.

While feminists do indeed make arguments for the use of such practices, the moral and ethical principles used to underpin their justification for violence vary widely, as has been suggested previously. The difficulty with synthesizing these principles into a single feminist ethic of security, as Sjoberg suggests, is due to what Vivienne Jabri rightly identifies as a “dualism between…an ‘ethic of justice’ identified with a Kantian ontological project of autonomous personhood and a contradictory ‘ethic of care’, the ontological project of which is centred on the relational self”.

It is possible to loosely organize the existing work on the feminist ethics of war around this dualism, with notions of justice, care, and relational autonomy as important motivators for the moral and ethical commitments of feminists espousing war as a means to achieve peace in certain situations. This section highlights three dominant strands of existing literature by feminists on the ethics of war: a feminist ethic of care, feminist just war theorizing, and other alternative approaches of feminist ethics. While not fully exhaustive, this typology of particular sets of feminist ethical principles attempts to sketch an inclusive roadmap of how feminists have unpacked the complex interactions between ethics and war to date, and exposes some of the commonalities among approaches as possible paths to the construction of a more cohesive feminist ethic of war.

**Feminist Ethics of Care**

The ethics of care is a long-standing theoretical tradition within feminist normative theory and contains a large and diverse body of literature dating back to the work of psychologist Carol Gilligan. In *In a Different Voice*, Gilligan suggests that men and women view morality differently, with women privileging notions of empathy and compassion over the masculine perspective of morality founded on justice and abstract duties or obligations.

The ethics of care is often contrasted with traditional ethical approaches of a consequentialist or deontological nature, critiquing such approaches for their abstraction and masculine appeals to justice in viewing morality rather than understanding and appreciating the relationships between individuals and the responses individuals give to others based on a shared empathy. These tenets of feminist care ethics have been imported into feminist IR discussions of the ethics of war by a number of scholars in recent years. Sara Ruddick’s appeals for an ethics of peace centred around virtues of mothering and practices of motherhood are informed by many of the same notions of care espoused by the earlier work of Gilligan. Fiona Robinson’s arguments for the integration of feminist ethics of care into international political theory also represents a shift of care ethics into the arena of international relations. As Robinson suggests, “care can be both moral principle and practice in global politics”.

Through her acknowledgement of international political theory as failing to adequately address questions of gender and feminist thought in the field’s understandings of global politics, Robinson brings notions of trust, responsibility, and care to bear on the work of existing theories of international ethics. In so doing, she not only highlights the gendered nature of existing moral theory in IR, but also suggests that the field of international security (as an important aspect of global politics) can be critically examined by using care as a guiding moral principle. In particular, the care ethics espoused by Robinson is critical as it

---

“exposes the ways in which dominant norms and discourses sustain existing power relations that lead to inequalities in the way in which societies determine how and on what bases care will be given and received”. 38 This project of a critical feminist ethics of care leads us to question the dominance of ontological and normative frameworks that privilege autonomous power relations with little regard for the role of gender identities, a particularly salient questioning when examining the ethics of war and political violence.

The recent work of Jean Elshtain in defense of the United States’ war with Afghanistan 39 also exemplifies the deployment of feminist care ethics in analyses of war, though it marks a significant departure from her earlier work focused on just war theorizing.40 Elshtain invokes a variant of an ethic of care in her discussions of the Wars on Terror, arguing that a love and empathy for the ‘neighbors’ of the United States (i.e. the people of Afghanistan and Iraq) justifies fighting the war, as she says the lives of the ‘neighbors’ would be improved once the United States removed the oppressive regimes that ruled the countries.41 She takes influence from the work of St. Augustine, particularly in her understandings of notions of frailty and vulnerability, to unpack questions of care and empathy in the American involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq. While Elshtain’s earlier work sat more squarely in the realm of feminist just war theorizing - and she sees these more recent explorations as compatible with rather than in opposition to that tradition – I suggest that Elshtain’s contributions towards the ethics of the War on Terror occupy a transitory theoretical position not clearly identifiable as either feminist care ethics or feminist understandings of just war. Elshtain’s complex use of ‘care ethics’ in this context has been criticized by feminist IR scholars, with Sjoberg suggesting that while her earlier work interrogated the hegemonic assumptions of just war, her defense of the Wars on Terror constitutes “hegemony in the name of feminism”.42

While its use and effectiveness remain debated in the literature, care ethics have become an integral part of feminist ethical thought with respect to war and political violence. Its focus on empathy, relationality, and responsibility have the potential to bring significant insights to how warfare is conducted and in what circumstances feminist ethics might justify violence as a means to achieving peace. Nevertheless, it remains important to consider the critiques of care ethics that scholars like Anna Höglund have identified, namely the continued reliance on distinctions between public and private spheres as well as reason and emotion in developing an ethical framework.43 Höglund sees a gendered dualism existing between the ethics of care and an ethics of justice, and suggests, like others,44 the need to move beyond it by rejecting a reliance on traditional gendered understandings of moral concepts such as the responsibilities to care versus rights and autonomy versus interdependence. By casting a critical eye on how feminists employ care in discussions of war and international politics, we may allow for construction of a meaningful feminist ethic of war premised on notions of care that have been central to feminist thought for decades while remaining attentive to the risks

41 Elshtain, J.B. (2003), 38.
of reification and redeployment of gender stereotypes that serve to maintain patriarchal relationships at the international level.

**Feminist Just War Theory**

As perhaps the most cohesive set of ethical principles guiding the development of feminist thought on the ethics of war, feminist critiques of just war theory have become central to the way in which feminist IR scholars have theorized the moral acceptability of war in recent years. The early work of Jean Elshtain critiques the dominant symbols of men and women as fighters and non-combatants in war respectively, identifying them as the ‘Just Warrior’ and ‘Beautiful Soul’. In her view, we must challenge these formulations of men and women in times of political violence, and question the implications of the just war tradition that lead us to extol the fair and righteous virtue of just war fighters (‘Just Warriors’) and wish to protect the values and virtues of home and family represented by the ‘Beautiful Soul’. Elshtain sees the just war tradition as it has been employed by mainstream IR theorists like Walzer as unnecessarily rigid and prioritizing a particular set of civic virtues through a set of standards by which we are meant to judge the ethical nature of particular acts of political violence. This set of criteria lead, in Elshtain’s view, to an exclusive language whereby threats are abstracted with strategic discourse, particularly as technological advancements in warfare have occurred. She argues that this exclusionary masculinist language can be replaced by a more inclusive and flexible discourse of war that takes into account the multiplicity of perspectives and contextual nature of warfare practices. While Elshtain does not define in *Women and War* exactly what a feminist theory of just war should look like, her critiques of the dominant just war tradition can be seen as a watershed in the development of feminist ethical perspectives of war.

Lucinda Peach provides a more systematic critique of just war from a feminist perspective, identifying several areas around which feminists have found problems with the dominant just war discourse: “its relation to realism; its failure to insist that all criteria have been satisfied in accordance with rigorous standards…its tendency to abstraction and to dichotomize reality…and the priority it accords to the state and to state authority”. However, she suggests that much of the feminist critique has not been specific enough and has not advocated for a tenable alternative to just war theory. She highlights Elshtain’s proposed “revitalized civic discourse” and Ruddick’s “maternal peace politics” as two notable non-pacifist feminist responses to just war theory, but argues that Elshtain’s proposal to break down gender dichotomies and Ruddick’s politics of peace based on maternal thinking do little to adequately challenge the deficiencies feminists have identified with the tradition. Peach suggests a feminist revitalization of just war theory with several elements: an inclusion of women in understandings of human nature; more serious attention paid to pacifist arguments and nonviolent alternatives; the use of collaboration in assessing whether violence is necessary; more attention paid to context and particularity; a more comprehensive examination of all consequences of political violence; a concern for relationships between combatants and enemies, and a radical reconfiguration or breakdown of dichotomous understandings of gender, combatant status, and state-individual relationships.

While Peach’s fundamental rethinking of just war theory from a feminist perspective certainly lends significant insights to the many ways in which traditional just war theorizing is problematic, her list of feminist transformations of just war criteria fails to fully address the

---

49 Ibid., 163-4.
50 Ibid., 164-7.
more substantive problem of whether or not it is possible to identify a finite number of criteria through which the ethical acceptability of political violence can be judged. While her criteria are undoubtedly more broadly specified than those typically iterated by mainstream scholarship in the just war tradition, I suggest the maintenance of any criteria in the form of categories and principles may be too restrictive an approach to thinking about a feminist ethics of war, limiting the full potential for alternative formulations and imaginative perspectives that can result from integrating feminist ethical theorizing into our understandings about war. Peach’s suggestions also raise questions as to the practical possibility of attaining positive results from such a theory of just war – with such specific and exhaustively detailed standards to meet, is such a typology even useful in attempting to uncover the moral and ethical dilemmas of using violence to achieve peace? For many mainstream just war scholars, the usefulness of the theory came from its simplicity and the standards ascribed to decide whether or not a war could be seen as just. While the oversimplification of such a decision is also highly problematic, the complex nature of the prescriptions given by Peach leads us to question the applicability of feminist thought to the theoretical framework presented by the just war tradition.

In some ways, Sjoberg’s work on feminist just war theory and the wars in Iraq serves to clarify the tangled web of considerations articulated by Peach’s feminist revitalization of just war. Sjoberg centres her conceptions of feminist just war on the notion of empathetic cooperation, a single feminist security ethic that combines notions of care and justice through gendered lenses and allows feminisms to participate in relational autonomy.\textsuperscript{51} Influenced by the work of Sylvester\textsuperscript{52}, Sjoberg sees empathetic cooperation as a supportive approach to relational autonomy with the ‘other’, whereby individuals become relationally autonomous with those outside their own community or value system.\textsuperscript{53} This understanding of empathy and relationality informs the ways in which Sjoberg rethinks the \textit{jus ad bellum} and \textit{jus in bello} concerns of the just war tradition to more accurately reflect feminist understandings of war and violence in international relations. For example, according to Sjoberg, feminist right authority therefore makes use of dialogue between divergent perspectives and collective decision-making, while feminist just cause would consist of a feminist framework for determining the justice of given reasons for war that is premised on participatory and holistic approaches to planning based on social justice, a material concern for individual suffering, and an acknowledgement of proportional and distributive justice.\textsuperscript{54}

This reformulation of \textit{ad bellum} just war principles certainly helps to clarify the often vague assertions made by feminists about rethinking just war, and in this way provides a useful contribution to the field of feminist IR. As Sjoberg rightfully suggests, “in a feminist ethic of war, war is not punishment or show, but an attempt to fix a problem”\textsuperscript{55}, and it is essential that both the problem and all possible solutions are clearly defined before making an ethical judgment on their acceptability from a feminist perspective. Similarly, Sjoberg’s \textit{in bello} considerations – in particular her assertion that “feminist ethics of war reformulates standards of \textit{jus in bello} to account for the realities of women’s lives in wartime”\textsuperscript{56} – highlight the usefulness of her argument in shedding light on the particular experiences felt by women in war, an outcome desired by feminists working in all areas of theorizing in war and international security.

\textsuperscript{51} Sjoberg, L. (2006), 45.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 72-9.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 81.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 89.
However, the arguments set out by Sjoberg in her construction of a feminist just war theory do not serve to fully answer the question of whether or not the just war tradition is even a useful starting point for feminist analyses of the ethics of war. As will be suggested subsequently, I believe the many problems of just war as a theoretical framework severely limit its potential for employment by feminists in unpacking the complex relationship between gender, ethics, and political violence. While Elshtain, Peach, Sjoberg and others have attempted to overcome the aforementioned difficulties of just war theory by rethinking its principles and applying strands of feminist thought to its various components, I argue that such a task is ultimately unfruitful, partly due to the restrictive nature of the tradition itself. In particular, these restrictions exist within three broad categories: firstly, the *jus ad bellum* principles of just war theory are highly ambiguous, making them virtually impossible for feminists to reformulate without falling into the same trap of obfuscating the realities of warfare as traditional just war scholarship. Second, even feminist rethinking of just war problematically relies to some degree on the false Just Warrior/Beautiful Soul dichotomy outlined by Elshtain, given the highly gendered nature of contemporary war-making and war-fighting. That is, depictions of women as pacifist non-combatants – and conversely, of men as aggressive war-fighters – continue to pervade our understandings of war, given the real exclusions faced by women in occupying combat roles in militaries around the world as well as the sustained marginalization of feminist theories of political violence in larger intellectual debates surrounding war. Therefore, feminist interpretations of just war risk slippages into a reliance on these pervasive images when attempting to redefine criteria for evaluating the ethical acceptability of war, as political violence itself remains firmly rooted in a gendered context whereby the male/female war/peace dichotomy is presented in multiple arenas. Third, it is extremely difficult to fully erase the connections between the just war tradition and realist theories of International Relations, given its appeals to a set of universal, objective ideals from which we can make ethical judgments about the acceptability of war. It is nevertheless important to note that just war is itself a quite complex tradition with a long and varied history and a multiplicity of approaches. However, much of the tradition has been associated with the development of what can broadly be identified as realist thought, and as early work by Ann Tickner suggests, realist theories of international politics “are rooted in assumptions about human nature and morality that, in modern Western culture, are associated with masculinity”. Therefore, the inherent linkages between just war theory and realism – those centered around concepts of autonomy and universal norms - result in gendered understandings of the nature of war that are difficult, if not impossible, for feminists using the same framework to overcome. For these reasons, I caution against the use of just war theory by feminists, and instead advocate for a synthesis of various elements of feminist ethics taken from traditions of justice, care, and feminist just war in the construction of a new feminist ethical conceptual framework, rather than an appropriation and reformulation of an existing framework – such as that of the just war tradition – in order to develop a cohesive feminist ethic of war.

Further, Sjoberg’s work signals another potential limitation to the existing body of literature examining the feminist ethics of war. Much of the evidence and justification for her feminist just war principles stem from a single set of empirical situations, the two American wars in Iraq. While her reformulation of just war theory certainly marks the most substantive contribution to date by the group of feminist IR scholars attempting to identify what a feminist ethic of war looks like, her reliance on the two Gulf Wars as empirical evidence leads us to question whether or not a feminist just war theory might only be useful in

particular contextual circumstances, rather than being able to tell us something about war broadly conceived. What are the limits of using a single empirical situation to tell the story of feminist just war, and would a unique and newly constructed feminist ethical framework be more conducive to its application across a wide range of contemporary warfare practices? These are important questions that Sjoberg does not fully address in her own scholarship, but necessitate answers if we are to move forward in feminist IR towards a singular feminist ethic of war.

**Alternative Feminist Ethical Approaches**

An analysis of feminist scholarship’s ethical contributions to the study of war would be incomplete without recognizing the body of work that falls outside the purview of debates surrounding care ethics and just war specifically. Many of these examinations have particularly useful insights, given their variety and heterogeneous starting points, whether from a perspective of justice, human rights and security, or experience and narrative. Much of the feminist work examining an ethic of justice is rooted in understandings of human rights. Moving beyond Kantian approaches to autonomous personhood, a feminist ethic of justice is influenced by collective experiences of humanity, taking into account the particularly gendered experiences felt by women in the international political arena. Anna Höglund’s work is representative of this justice-based ethical feminist approach to war. In her examination of rape in war, she critiques the ethics of care for failing to challenge the distinction between the public and private spheres due to the deeply embedded nature of gender norms, and goes on to suggest an alternative: a narrative, feminist ethic of justice based on narratives from women who have experienced injustices such as rape in war.\(^{58}\) For Höglund, it is essential to challenge the reified distinctions between public/private and reason/emotion. She suggests that the way we formulate human rights must be grounded in the actual experiences of individuals whose rights have been violated, particularly the gendered experiences of women who have been the victims of rape in war.\(^{59}\) Using this approach, it is no longer possible for wartime sexual violence to remain invisible as a war crime, as the injustices felt by the women affected constitute a substantive part of how human rights are identified.

Recent work on the ethical considerations of technology in feminist International Relations points to similar characteristics of justice through experience and narrative as important to a feminist ethical approach to war. As Gillian Youngs suggests, one of the most powerful feminist critiques of technological developments in surveillance and warfare is of “their disembodied qualities: their abstractions that take emphasis away from embodied lived experience.”\(^{60}\) Like Höglund, Youngs emphasises the need for ethical judgments in war and international politics to stem directly from the experiences of individuals as well as prioritize notions of embodiment when attempting to understand social processes.\(^{61}\) Such an approach to the ethics of war does not directly concern itself with notions of care, responsibility, vulnerability, and relationality that are often seen in analyses of war from an ethics of care perspective; however, it does not outright reject the inherent value principles of such an approach – like care ethics, the feminist ethics seen in the work of Höglund and Youngs focuses on the lives of particular marginalized populations and attempts to uncover the silences that are often masked by masculinist understandings of international relations. Due

---

59 Ibid., 346.
61 Ibid., 124.
to its focus on narrative and experience, this work is closely linked to much of what Sjoberg, Robinson, and others have highlighted in feminist just war theorizing and a feminist ethics of care. Through its focus on narrative and embodiment, these approaches to feminist ethics move beyond a traditional Kantian perspective of justice as stemming from the project of autonomous personhood. The overlap between all of these approaches demonstrates the highly heterogeneous nature of feminist theorizing on the ethics of war – given the multiple starting locations and numerous ways in which feminist scholars have analyzed the complex relationship between ethical judgment and political violence, it is evident that a neatly organized typology of feminist ethical approaches to war is neither a possible or useful tool in unpacking the existing literatures.

A 2008 special issue of *Hypatia* examining feminist just war theorizing presents several other feminist ethical perspectives on war that do not neatly fall into the care ethics or just war literatures, and provide additional insights into the importance of experiences, narratives, and women’s particular lives and positioning in society. Marian Eide’s contribution to the issue suggests that as mothers and wives, women possess a unique distance from the nation and its responsibility as war-maker, but it is nevertheless important for women to seriously think about war and its justification without immediately opting for pacifism. She uses a narrative of her mother’s own experiences to demonstrate this position of privileged distance with which women often find themselves, highlighting the importance to continue challenging mainstream ethical understandings of war and political violence. Robin May Schott’s and Bat-Ami Bar On’s contributions to the special issue are more sceptical of the usefulness of feminist just war theorizing, albeit for different reasons. Schott presents an approach to the feminist ethics of war rooted in historical context, arguing that post-Auschwitz it is necessary to conceive of war as evil rather than just, and to maintain a memory of previous political violence when attempting to pass judgements on the ethical acceptability of war. In “The Opposition of Politics and War”, Bar On continues this emphasis on memory, suggesting that war is both ethically and politically haunting and our thinking about it is never complete or stabilized. To this end, Bar On suggests the usefulness of feminist ethics in thinking about political violence is in its nonideal, normative differentiation among different types of violent action rather than in a set of stable, guiding principles as presented in feminist just war reformulations. As these special issue contributions suggest, a review of the existing literature of feminist ethical analyses of war is far from settled or cohesive, and stretches far beyond the borders of care ethics and just war theorizing specifically. Feminists have interrogated war using ethical understandings of justice, narrative, and experience, demonstrating the usefulness of a variety of insights that begin from alternative ethical perspectives to the more commonly interrogated notions of care and just war.

*Beyond Justice, Care, and Just War*

Whether or not feminist scholarship on the ethics of war continues to employ frameworks of care, just war, or approaches rooted in conceptions of justice and narrative for the ethical assessment of political violence for the foreseeable future, it remains the case that the multiplicity of approaches to understanding feminist ethics in war has both positive and negative implications. A clear benefit is the field’s representativeness of multiple feminisms – by considering all the aforementioned perspectives under the umbrella of feminist thought, the diversity of ethical arguments for war support the feminist project of inclusiveness and

acknowledge the subjective and contextual nature of knowledge that feminisms seek to protect. Moreover, the rich existing body of literature results in a useful starting point for new analyses, as there are a variety of approaches to consider when attempting to make judgments about the ethical nature of a particular conflict rather than a singular perspective.

However, the continued use of multiple strands of feminist ethics in analyses of war also has inherent dangers. As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, it risks a continued marginalization of feminist ethical perspectives from wider debates about the ethics of war in IR. In its current state, non-feminist scholars may remain resistant to engaging with feminist scholarship on the issue of ethics, leaving both sets of perspectives under-theorized as they are unable to gain potentially useful and substantive insights from each other. A second danger resulting from the multiple interpretations of feminist war ethics is the potential for conceptual confusion and a lack of specificity. With various feminist analyses each advocating for slightly different sets of ethical principles to guide our decisions about the acceptability of violence in particular political contexts, feminists risk losing the critical edge of their research programme as notions of justice, care, and just war become vague and nebulous constructions that give little useful insights about when it can be deemed ethically appropriate to enact war in order to achieve peace. It is necessary to identify the useful contributions that have been made to date across a wide variety of feminist ethical approaches to war and aggregate them in order to clarify and strengthen a feminist perspective on the ethics of political violence. Therefore, it is not the multiplicity and heterogeneity of feminist analyses of ethics and war that is problematic; rather, it is the way in which they have been presented to date. By interrogating the existing literatures in order to engage with the most valuable components from a variety of articulations by feminists about the relationship between ethics and war, it is possible to construct a framework that can be applied to particular instances of political violence in order to provide us with new and useful insights into the nature of war and ethical judgment.

The remainder of this paper attempts take into account the most useful principles provided by existing feminist ethical analyses of war and use them in a distinctive critical feminist ethical framework through which evaluations can be made about the appropriateness of violent versus nonviolent forces to solve international political conflicts. Unlike the rigidity of the just war tradition, this framework provides a flexible and contextually aware outline of guiding principles that can be used to gain insights about the ethical implications of war in general, and in particular the ethical dilemmas inherent in contemporary practices of warfare such as drone technology and the use of private military contractors. By moving beyond the existing multiple typologies of feminist ethics as they relate to war, it is possible to imagine what a distinctive feminist ethic of war might look like and what types of useful insights it may have into the particular feminist ethical concerns of twenty-first century political violence.

**Feminist Responses to the Problems of Just War: Successes and Limitations**

Given the pre-eminence of just war theory in International Relations as the dominant way through which scholars theorize about the ethics of war, it is appropriate to precede my own theoretical framework with a brief discussion of how feminist ethics has responded to the problems of the just war tradition in their own examinations of morality and political violence. As the previous section outlined, feminist understandings of the ethics of war have ranged from approaches directly critiquing just war theory to those focused on alternative approaches of care or justice. However, it is important to make clear the connections between four key problems of the contemporary just war tradition - that is, issues of complexity, responsibility, technology, and definitions of war – and the ways in which feminist ethics has provided (or failed to provide) solutions to these problems, in both explicit and implicit ways.
From these successes and limitations, it is then possible to construct a critical feminist ethical framework that rethinks the contributions of feminist ethics to studies of war and identifies which concepts are central to how we assess the moral and ethical questions of contemporary conflict.

The notion of complexity is one area that is particularly problematic for the contemporary just war tradition. Given its high level of abstraction through the application of a set of rules or principles by which we can judge the ethical nature of (any) conflict, just war theory does not adequately address the complexities of contemporary war or acknowledge the need for contextuality and particularity in its analyses. As seen in this paper, feminist work on the ethics of war has attempted to mitigate the issue of complexity by advocating for an increased engagement with notions of connections and relationships between individuals (relational approaches) as well as bring more attention to the particular aspects of suffering and atrocities of war that vary widely across a spectrum of political violence (contextual approaches). These understandings of relationality, contextuality, embeddedness, and an emphasis on the particular are centrally important to the construction of a feminist ethical approach to war that overcomes one of the most significant shortfalls of the just war tradition. However, the tendency for some feminist approaches to remain within a just war framework while attempting to provide a solution to the abstraction issue is fundamentally problematic. An adherence to the general *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello* principles of just war, even if modified to acknowledge the need for context and complexity, is not sufficient as it inherently maintains the level of abstraction that is necessary in order to construct a set of rules or principles by which to judge the ethics of war. Therefore, the work of Sjoberg and others who have advocated for a revisiting or reformulation of just war, rather than a wholesale rethinking of the ways in which feminist IR scholarship can engage in analyses of ethics and war, serves as a limitation to the development of a feminist ethic of war – a limitation that the framework constructed in the subsequent section of this paper attempts to overcome.

Linked to how just war theory understands abstraction and complexity are the problematic assumptions that underpin its conception of responsibility, another area of the contemporary just war tradition that feminist ethics scholarship has engaged with. For Walzer and other mainstream just war theorists, soldiers and most civilians of an attacking country are exempt from moral responsibility, whether the war being fought is just or unjust. This exemption, based on principles of the moral equality of soldiers and non-combatant immunity, is oversimplified and lacks the nuance needed to accurately depict the ethical nature of war. Critiques have been levelled against mainstream just war’s assumptions of responsibility from various approaches to ethics and morality, and feminist ethics scholarship is also troubled by the tendency of traditional just war analyses to automatically award immunity to wide swaths of the involved populations regardless of particular circumstances of the conflict. However, more work is needed to adequately address how feminist ethics can include a more nuanced and flexible conception of responsibility into its analyses of war – as I suggest in the following section, a framework that includes responsibility as one of its central elements highlights its importance in understanding ethical complexities of contemporary war. Given the changing nature of warfare, shifting from battlefield combat to highly technologized efforts that are often combined with local counterinsurgency missions, questions of responsibility are especially salient and deserve increased attention in our attempts to make ethical judgements about contemporary warfare practices.

---

A third area problematic area of just war theory is its failure to deal with the nebulous boundaries distinguishing what exactly qualifies as war. Feminist ethics have called into question the defining of war by just war theorists, some suggesting, like Danielle Poe, that the tradition provides an overly narrow picture of war that does not accurately depict the true costs of conflict, regardless of whether or not they can be justified on moral grounds. While Poe and Robin May Schott’s recent work, among others, argue for a rejection of the just war framework in order to achieve a clearer picture of the reality of war (for Poe this results in an ‘ethics of sexual difference’, while for Schott it means the impossibility of defining any war as morally legitimate), some feminist scholarship suggest that the just war framework itself can be maintained if reformulated to widen the understanding of what counts as war – largely through a focus on jus post bellum principles. To this end, feminist ethical analyses of definitions of war certainly have the possibility of providing useful insights into what is to be considered a war, but have been limited to a certain extent by continued reliance on a just war framework. Other, more radical conceptions of war that have been articulated by feminist ethicists therefore deserve to be taken seriously if a new framework for articulating a feminist ethic of war can be constructed. As will be evidenced in the final section of this paper, a framework that takes the realities of contemporary war as significant in a flexible and reflexive way rather than using an overly narrow picture of war in order to fit within the confines of a certain set of rules or principles is a more effective means to shed new light on the ethical implications of modern conflicts and tools of war-fighting than the antiquated just war tradition.

Finally, questions surrounding the nature and use of technology in war are a fourth realm that is problematic for mainstream just war theorizing. Although some contemporary scholarship in just war has attempted to address the issue of technology by revisiting how to implement jus in bello principles of war in the face of technological advancements – most commonly examining issues of distinction and proportionality – there remain gaps in just war understandings of combatant/non-combatant criteria as well as the effects and impacts of distance on our understandings of proportionality and imminent danger. While feminist ethicists’ direct engagement on the nexus between war and technology has been limited, the ethical concepts of relationality, experience and empathy that feminist ethics scholarship has advanced in recent years are certainly relevant to these issues – questions surrounding the ways in which relationships between combatants and their targets (as well as innocent civilians) are mediated by technology are clearly informed by these relational and empathetic understandings of the ‘other’. By engaging with these concepts in a critical feminist ethical framework in order to make moral and ethical judgements about practices of war, it is possible to more accurately depict the importance of technology to the study of ethics in contemporary conflicts.

Having demonstrated several significant ways that feminist scholarship has responded to the previously identified problems of the contemporary just war tradition, it is now possible to construct a framework that synthesizes the areas in which feminist ethics has seen

---

the most success in rethinking the ethics of war in order to move beyond the difficulties presented by the just war framework and its declining relevance in 21st century ethical theorizing. Taking four key tenets of feminist ethics – relationality, experience, empathy, and responsibility – the framework described in the subsequent section advocates for a more flexible and reflexive way of looking at the ethics of war and a rethinking of moral justifications for contemporary warfare through a feminist lens. Such a lens, it is argued, sheds new light on previously obscured aspects of ethical and moral considerations of the practices of modern war-fighting, and provides insights about the complexity of ethical questions that arise from contemporary practices of war that would otherwise go uncovered by more traditional forms of ethical inquiry – particularly the just war tradition.

**Beyond Just War: A Critical Feminist Ethical Theoretical Framework**

Having identified the most salient shortcomings of existing feminist ethical approaches to studying war, this section outlines what I suggest is a more productive set of guidelines with which feminist IR scholars can engage in ethical appraisals of contemporary warfare practices. These guidelines, rather than being placed in the strictly delineated set of principles or criteria that much recent work in the just war tradition has attempted to preserve, exist in an environment that is highly contextual, reflexive, and flexible, responding to the particularities of contemporary war phenomena while bringing new insights to the complex moral and ethical questions that surround practices such as drone warfare and private military contracting. This emphasis on context and reflexivity does not suggest that such a framework could not possess any analytical usefulness beyond each individual case – on the contrary, as the ethical principles identified here are applied as guidelines while remaining attuned to the specific moral dilemmas presented by each practice examined, I suggest that a shift away from the universalist, ‘checklist-style’ approach of the contemporary just war tradition can tell us much more about the ethics of war than a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer telling us whether a war is just or not. As feminist IR scholarship has long advocated, it is necessary to look beyond the questions that have already been asked or deemed ‘important’ in International Relations in order to discover deeper understandings that challenge the core assumptions of the discipline and deconstruct its core concepts.  

It is in this context that I construct a critical feminist ethical framework for examining the ethics of contemporary warfare practices.  

Stemming from the problematic aspects of just war theory identified previously as well as existing feminist interventions in the ethics of war literature outlined in previous sections of this paper, I argue that there are four key elements which are essential to a feminist ethical framework attempting to examine the moral and ethical questions surrounding political violence in the current era: relationality, experience, empathy, and responsibility. Each of these elements has been taken up in various ways by both feminist and non-feminist scholars of ethics and have occasionally been employed in discussions of war and violence. However, the synthesis of these elements and an acknowledgement of their interconnectedness when unpacking issues of ethical significance with relation to contemporary warfare remain under-examined both in feminist IR scholarship and the discipline more generally. I suggest that it is through the combining of these elements that this framework can serve as a cohesive feminist challenge to the pervasiveness of the just war tradition and discover new insights about the ethical complexities of warfare practices including drones and private military contracting as they become increasingly pervasive in the international arena.

---

As the first element of this ethical framework, thinking about relationality is an attempt to mitigate issues around the just war tradition that do not give adequate consideration to individuals, the relationships between them, and how those relationships raise important ethical questions about the nature of war. By highlighting the importance of these relationships, the picture of ethics in war becomes somewhat more complex than that described by scholars of just war theory as the interdependence of actors in war is emphasised rather than dismissed in attempts to provide simplified answers to complicated moral questions. As Sylvester suggests, a relational understanding of autonomy preserves the independence of self while acknowledging the importance of interdependence between self and other as well as the political and social relationships between actors. This emphasis on relationality has been important to feminist work attempting to rethink the ethics of war – for example, Laura Sjoberg’s feminist reformulation of just war theory takes Sylvester’s understanding of relational autonomy as a central part of her development of ‘empathetic cooperation’ as a feminist security ethic. However, unlike Sjoberg, I see relationality as operating and interacting simultaneously with the other elements of this ethical framework.

In order to overcome the restrictive and simplified nature of the just war tradition, I suggest an emphasis on relationality as an ethical guideline that is premised on moral agency as inherently relational and the self as socially constituted. This in turn leads to the need for a continual re-examination of the relationships between self and others, as these relationships are highly dynamic. In the context of war, this results in an understanding of the development of relationships between combatants, as well as combatant-target and combatant-innocent relationships are all ethically significant. In addition, a focus on the relational leads to an acknowledgement of the importance of dialogue and listening in ethical considerations, as these are crucial elements of any relationship. An understanding of relationality with these sorts of characteristics can be found in the work of many feminist care ethicists, including Carol Gilligan. Gilligan argues for a feminist ethic of care that is founded in a relational ethics whereby the interests of self are woven together with the interests of others, and decisions made as a relational unit. While this framework contains elements of such a feminist ethic of care, and is largely consistent with care ethics’ emphasis on relationality, it attempts to move beyond the work of care ethics in its synthesis of a variety of ethical guidelines into a cohesive feminist ethic of war.

Experience is the second key element of the feminist ethical framework this thesis advocates for, and serves an important function in moving beyond the difficulties of the just war tradition for feminist ethics. Specifically, including experience as a central element of feminist ethical theorizing on war helps to bring into focus the issues that are at the heart of appraisals of the morality of contemporary warfare practices. Rather than dealing at a high level of abstraction, as just war scholarship remains hesitant to move away from, an examination of experience allows us not only to pinpoint the particular contexts in which ethical dilemmas are raised – for example, focusing on the experience of sitting in an office cube in Nevada as a drone pilot operator rather than simply discussing the ethics of drones in an abstract sense – but also creates an environment where it is possible to make clearer distinctions about the nature and definitions of war, another area just war theory has failed to adequately deal with.

---

To this end, experience as an ethical guideline can be understood in this context as a focus on the importance of the lived personal experiences of individuals, a recognition of the diversity and heterogeneity present in experience, and an examination of the ways in which experiences serve to shape ethical judgement. This understanding of experience is contextual and acknowledges the importance of history and past events in the development of ethical considerations, rather than examining them ahistorically, abstracted from their original contexts and experiences. Experience has been an important element of feminist ethical thought for several decades, with scholars such as Rita Manning arguing in the early 1990s for a moral theory that favours normative principles serving as guidelines grounded in experience rather than broad principles grounded in abstract reasoning. More recently in feminist IR, Christine Sylvester’s significant work on war and experience emphasises the importance of experience as a concept relating to war. As she suggests, “bodies experience war in differentiated and mediated ways, but the body is central. Experience is therefore the physical and emotional connections with war that people live – with their bodies and their minds and as social creatures in specific circumstances.” This feminist connection between war and experience is crucial, and is included in this framework to expand its relevance into the arena of moral and ethical dilemmas in war.

A third element of a feminist ethical framework for examining war is empathy. Like relationality, empathy has been explored most commonly by feminist care ethics, but has received little attention from mainstream scholarship examining the ethics of war. I suggest that it is an essential aspect of a feminist ethical framework as it acknowledges the importance of emotion and feeling, taking another step in moving beyond the abstraction and oversimplification of war seen in the contemporary just war tradition. Further, foregrounding empathy serves to bolster the ethical considerations brought to bear by thinking about war relationally and experientially. When we assert that it is ethically important not only to think about the relationships and experiences we have with others but to have empathy for them, the moral questions surrounding war – and in particular, wars fought in highly technologized and privatised ways – become more complex and unable to answer using a strictly delineated set of abstract principles or criteria.

A focus on empathy also serves to highlight the important distinction between sympathy and empathy, articulating a need to move beyond a simple recognition of or appreciation for the situations of others and instead feel as they do. As Sjoberg suggests, “empathy is not sharing others’ experience, nor is it pitying others’ plights. Instead it is, in some non-trivial way, feeling their pain.” This understanding of the pain and suffering caused by political violence is radically different than one where such emotions are considered morally acceptable because a war is just, and suggests a need for thinking more critically about the ethics of war based on the importance of empathy as a central concern. Similarly, Robinson suggests that using empathy as an ethical guideline allows us to consider context, relationality, and particularity in care in order to mitigate the effects of difference. Daryl Koehn’s discussion of empathy provides a useful example of the potential benefits of such a concept in an ethical framework for war – as she suggests, “empathy allows someone else’s experience and perspective to become a part of our moral baseline and therefore can

---

function to help us overcome prejudices and misconceptions.”78 She goes on to highlight empathy’s ability to assess our own efficacy as moral agents, rightly claiming that “if an empathetic conversation with another shows us that what we thought was a benefit is in fact a harm, then we had better rethink our claim to be just.”79 Therefore, empathy plays an important role as an ethical guideline for thinking about war – the need to think empathically about the moral nature of contemporary warfare, in combination with understandings of relationality, experience, and responsibility, serves to uncover important ethical insights about the ways wars are waged in the twenty-first century.

A fourth and final element of the feminist ethical framework is responsibility. Thinking about responsibility as an ethical guideline means acknowledging the importance of ascribing moral responsibility for actions, as well as an understanding of the responsibilities that we have to each other. Specifically with respect to the ethics of war, I suggest that thinking about responsibility is critical as there is a need for the recognition of concrete realities and atrocities of war as well as the assigning of responsibility for them, regardless of whether a war is deemed morally justifiable. As I suggested previously, the contemporary just war tradition’s failure to adequately assess questions of responsibility in its ethical appraisal of war serves as a fundamental shortcoming of the just war literature. A feminist ethical framework that acknowledges the need for responsibility and its ethical importance in thinking about contemporary practices of political violence allows us to think more substantively about what international actors are responsible for and when to ascribe responsibility to one party rather than another.

Importantly, a feminist understanding of responsibility also asserts the importance of the existence of shared responsibilities that we have for each other. As Heidi Grasswick suggests, there have been many significant developments in thinking about responsibility within feminist ethics, chief among them the need to move beyond a strictly delineated praise/blame version of moral responsibility and acknowledge the impurities of moral agency in a careful and contextual way when assigning responsibility for particular moral actions or decisions.80 The engagement with the concept of responsibility by Grasswick and other feminist ethicists suggests it remains a salient element of any feminist ethical framework. Specifically thinking about war, questions of responsibility for political violence are pervasive in International Relations, and bringing a feminist ethical understanding of the concept to bear on how we examine the ethics of war is an important part of this research project.

When applied to contemporary practices of war, this framework serves to complicate our ethical understandings about political violence. It calls into question the traditional judgements made about the morality of modern warfare by acknowledging the centrality of individuals, their relationships and shared experiences. By foregrounding relationality, experience, empathy, and responsibility as ethical guidelines for thinking about war, the framework is more reflective of the realities of war than the just war tradition and synthesizes many useful elements of feminist ethical theorizing in order to uncover fruitful insights about the complex ethical and moral questions surrounding contemporary warfare.

79 Koehn, D., ibid.