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## Ethical Issues of Autonomous Weapon Systems

The idea of weapons operating on their own volition has been explored in science fiction for more than a hundred years, but surprisingly little attention is given to the reality of the concept. Throughout history, automated weapon systems have been gradually becoming viable and currently some of them are already deployed in the field. Due to the lack of attention from the mainstream media, the implementation of these systems often receives little discussion and the majority of the ethical issues that such systems create remain unaddressed. This paper will provide an overview of such issues and how they can be considered unethical from the position of virtue ethics, deontological ethics and utilitarian ethics.

### **Brief History**

For the purposes of this paper the term autonomous weapon system would refer to programmable machines equipped with lethal weapons. Due to the relative novelty of the technology, terms and definitions are not concrete. Therefore, it is important to separate the concept of autonomous weapons from unmanned but remotely controlled weapons such as drones, and the science fiction idea of artificial intelligence. Autonomous weapon systems operate based on preprogrammed algorithms without the need for input from the operator after the parameters have been assigned.

The majority of such systems are defensive in nature as they were originally introduced as automated, radar-guided guns on ships in the 1970s (Hammes 14).

This type of systems was designed to both identify and neutralize missiles, rockets, and other projectiles, as well as enemy aircraft and vessels. The type of target is predetermined by the operator but no approval is required for engagement. This system was created out of the necessity to defend ships from fire that a human would not be able to react to in time. A similar system was later introduced for ground vehicles and missile defense projects.

However, the introduction of stationary automated turrets has proven itself to be controversial. These systems were installed on the South Korean border and in Israel and were specifically designed to fire at human targets. This implementation has already caused a number of deaths and the question of who is responsible for it is still unanswered (Guizzo and Ackerman 38). This could be a start of a much larger issue.

### **Ethical Issues**

The ethical issues of such systems can be seen by applying any of the three major ethics theories. Virtue ethics is the oldest presented philosophy but it presents the difficulty of examining this new issue. Virtue ethics proposes that an action is ethical if it represents one of the virtues. However, the actions of the machine completely lack those. In fact, almost any action by a machine without cautiousness would be considered unethical due to the nature of virtues. To be virtuous is to overcome the opposite aspect of humanity. Courage overcomes cowardice, but machine that cannot feel fear is unable to overcome it (Schulzke 187). Therefore, its nature is unethical.

Deontological beliefs argue that ethical decisions are done according to rules. The rules can be societal, governmental or universal. The main point is that motives behind the action matter more than its consequences. These systems are not

conscious which eliminates motives from the equation, but their possible use and proliferation in active combat break a variety of societal notions. For example, this system removes responsibility for murder from the killer, as a machine cannot be responsible for its actions, and the chain of command that was involved in its implementation is too long and convoluted to share the responsibility adequately (Bhuta and Krebs 338). The perils of bureaucracy are slowing the response to this issue.

On the first glance, it seems that utilitarian theory might consider the use of these systems as ethical, but a deeper examination reveals the opposite. Despite the success in tackling projectiles, automated weapon systems have a much lesser success in distinguishing people, or their motives. Moreover, the implementation of a technology that could prevent casualties by deliberately avoiding civilian targets is highly unlikely. These systems are often unable to distinguish civilians from the enemy which can lead to tragic events (Purves et al. 851). Another issue is the fact that intent is very hard to analyze for the system. In some parts of the world, people carry firearms in the open which would make it impossible to differentiate such people from the enemy by the presence of weapons. The nature of modern warfare is such that conflict often happens in a densely populated civilian area. A system that is likely to shoot an innocent person should not be utilized. Political tensions are extremely high at the moment and death of innocent citizens would create a much worse political climate, along with prolonged wars and more people dying (Floridi and Mariarosaria 16). Therefore, implementation of these systems would be unethical.

## **Conclusion**

Automated weapon systems may seem like a marvel of science, but it is perhaps too easy to think of them as fiction, when in reality they have been actively

used for more than 50 years. Currently, this technology is becoming more prolific and powerful. Hopefully, it would be stopped by the groups protesting against the use of automated weapons systems that do not involve the operator in decision making.

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