

The Questions

Is war ever justified?

Is war necessarily evil? What about humanitarian intervention?

What are the consequences of believing that war is a part of human nature?

What makes a “just war?”

Is pacifism realistic?

Can there ever be another Gandhi or MLK-like figure?

When it comes to human rights, does pacifism ever tread on neutrality?

How does the West demonstrate exceptionalism in war and conflict?

How does political clout affect who gets criticized?

How are war criminals treated in the Global North versus Global South?

How do international institutions decide what a war crime is? And, who to charge with those crimes?

Is the West accountable for violating Walzer’s principles of war?

Who should a self-driving car save in an impending collision? **

Should the car save the owner or the pedestrian?

What if the pedestrian is pregnant, or a child?

Who is at fault for a self-driving car accident?

Issues in Contemporary Ethics:

War

At a Glance

The ethics of starting, and conducting, war have been debated for millennia. As the tactics and technology rapidly develop, ethical thinking and perspectives must also develop. For example, there are military vehicles that are able to be remotely controlled and there are sentry guns that use Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology to fire at targets without human authorization. These are situations ethicists of the past did not encounter. This brief will explore how ethicists, and the international community, are attempting to grapple with questions emerging from new military technologies.



Engineer briefs military officials on the SGR-A1 (Kim Dong-Joo via Getty Images 2006)

Case Study: AI Sentries on the North/South Korean Border

Along the northern border of South Korea, a sentry gun stands guard. The sentry gun, named the SGR-A1, was developed by Samsung and is equipped with surveillance, voice recognition, tracking and firing, as well as an option for grenade launching. The SGR-A1 can operate on two systems. The first is a human-out-the-loop system, which allows the sentry to fire upon anyone within a certain radius and underlying conditions without anyone having to pull the trigger. The second is the human-in-the-loop system, which requires human authorization before firing. The international community’s response has been mixed. For example, the United Kingdom government has opposed bans and instead are advocating for proper humanitarian oversight. The United Nations, however, has publicly advocated for a ban on the use of fully-autonomous weapons. António Guterres, UN Secretary General, cites the lack of human involvement and indiscriminate nature as being “politically unacceptable” (UN News).

Implications

What relationship does war and technology have? Might machines reduce human errors? Or, will machines create their own errors? Who is accountable when lives are lost in fully-autonomous systems? The last of these questions is one of the main criticisms of autonomous weapons: the lack of the human element in killing and the ability to reduce morality to mere code. Autonomous weapons lack human discretion, but what of remote-control drones? Many innocent civilians have been killed from drone bombings, such as when an American drone killed 30 pine nut farmers in Afghanistan (Sultan and Sediqi). Walzer’s just war theory dictates that war should be conducted under the principles of proportionality, just cause, authority, comparative justice, right intervention, probability of success, and last resort. Consider how drones can bypass or warp these principles.

Further Reading

Global Security.org

[Samsung Techwin SGR-A1 Sentry Guard Robot](#)

UN Office for Disarmament Affairs

[Pathways to Banning Fully Autonomous Weapons](#)

United Nations

[Convention on Prohibition on Certain Conventional Weapons](#)

John Lewis

[The Case for Regulating Fully Autonomous Weapons](#)

Brent J. Steele and Eric A. Heinze

[From Smart to Autonomous Weapons: Confounding Territoriality and Moral Agency](#)

Rebecca Crootof

[War Torts: Accountability for Autonomous Weapons](#)

C. Anthony Pfaff

[The Ethics of Acquiring Disruptive Technologies: Artificial Intelligence, Autonomous Weapons, and Decision Support Systems](#)

Duncan Purves, Ryan Jenkins, Bradley J. Strawser

[Autonomous Machines, Moral Judgement, and Acting for the Right Reasons](#)

Comparing Perspectives

Ethical theories have been divided into rationalist theories and alternatives to them. Rationalist theories include: deontological, utilitarian, contractualist and discourse ethics. Alternatives include virtue ethics, feminist ethics, postcolonial, and postmodern ethics. In this series of Briefs, one rationalist and one alternative are explored to present contrasting views on an issue.

Utilitarianism

Drones and sentries are often used instead of human troops for their expanded capabilities and tactical advantage; remote-control technologies allow for long-distance surveillance or attack. This allows for traditionally risky missions to be initiated without endangering soldiers' lives. If drones are destroyed, while a huge cost, none of your troops are killed; a soldier's life is worth more than a drone. From a utilitarian standpoint, utility is increased through tactical advantage and lower-risk missions. If you are in combat, it should be expected as a commander to ensure the safety of your troops and defeat the enemy. An excessive, unproportioned attack can deter a response. However, this doesn't mean that there shouldn't be limitations to this. Under the Convention on Prohibition on Certain Conventional Weapons, weapons that are indiscriminate or excessively injurious are banned and have become norm in international law. Under this convention, weapons such as landmines, incendiary weapons, and laser weapons that blind have been banned not for the utility of one nation, but for the wellbeing of people on all sides of the conflict.

Postcolonialism

Postcolonialism is concerned with the power relations that have been, and still are, perpetuated by colonialism and its legacies. It considers both soft and hard power, as well as systems and structures of power. When it comes to autonomous weapons, a post-colonialist would consider who is allowed to develop and possess these weapons. This imbalance in access and power is already the case regarding countries have access to nuclear weapons. Those with nuclear weapons under the Non-Proliferation Treaty are the same permanent five members of the United Nations Security Council, unsurprisingly. India, Pakistan, and (unconfirmed) Israel also possess nuclear weapons while South Africa and some former Soviet states have been denuclearized. This leads to a continued power imbalance in the international system, which can be further perpetuated by a state's ability to make or break international law. By regulating and limiting the usage of these weapons, autonomous or not, it can level the playing field between historically dominant states and smaller powers.

Questions for Reflection

Through Just War theory and treaties, the international community attempts to limit the means of war. To what extent do you think these are helpful? Is there any way to truly limit a state? If not, why is it important that we have them? Humans have a complex consciousness that Robots and machines, even ones with AI, do not possess the same level. Why is this a problem with lethal weapons? What if autonomous weapons could be programmed with basic morality principles? Who are the ones programming these morals into the code and why does that matter for their usage?

[Autonomous weapons that kill must be banned, insists UN chief](#) | UN News. (n.d.).

Sultan, A and Sediqi . (2019, September 20). [U.S. drone strike kills 30 pine nut farm workers in Afghanistan](#)

[Kim Dong-Joo](#), (2006). Cheonan, Republic of Korea.