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CS 463G Fall 2016 – writing prompt #1: in no more than 250 words, discuss a pressing ethical challenge for AI practitioners

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Applying artificial intelligence (AI) to war, or militant operations, is an ethical challenge that I find very important. I’m going to put the ethical challenges of war itself aside for the purposes of this discussion, and consider the modern climate of militant violence.

I have learned about deep learning – a subfield of AI – through significant study and research. AI can accomplish tasks at high levels of precision. Tasks such as object recognition and tracking, speech recognition and generation, and numerous different classification tasks, generally – all of which can be directly applied to an intelligent militant agent.

Assume there is an agent that is given the task to search a city via aerial surveillance and spot a target. What level of accuracy must the agent compute before classifying a target as found? Now assume the same agent is tasked with also eliminating the target. With this new condition, what is the level of accuracy should we, as software engineers, define in order for the agent to attack the target? I believe we must have the utmost confidence in an automated war-robot before deploying it into action. There is the saying, “It is better 100 guilty Persons should escape than that one innocent Person should suffer,” as Benjamin Franklin wrote in a letter to Voltaire. Although our current AI is leagues ahead of where it has been, I feel that we are a far away from developing AI that reaches this level of accuracy. Furthermore, we must not be too quick to deploy a war-robot that is anything less than perfect.