

Autonomous Machines, Moral Judgment, and Acting for the Right Reasons

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War is inevitable, but what if mankind could engage in battles without having to physically fight themselves? This has recently been explored through technological advancements in Autonomous Weapon Systems, or AWS. They are anticipated to be able to make life and death targeting decisions on their own. However, with potential of such a powerful advancement comes serious concerns. In “Autonomous Machines, Moral Judgment, and Acting for the Right Reasons,” the authors Duncan Purves, Ryan Jenkins, and Bradley J. Strawser<sup>1</sup> recognize the benefits of AWS, but also outline these concerns specifically through the notion of morality.

Purves, Jenkins, and Strawser argue against the use of Autonomous Weapon Systems with two main objections. The first objection is that human moral judgment cannot be made into code, therefore robots, or AWS, cannot think and act accordingly as a human would.<sup>2</sup> It would be unethical to deploy them, because moral judgment is required for appropriate moral decision making. The second objection is that even if programmers could successfully program these robots to make moral decisions that are equal to or better than that of humans, these decisions would not be made for the right reasons because Artificial Intelligence lacks an attitude of belief or desire.<sup>3</sup> AI can only mimic human behavior, and therefore cannot act according to what they believe to be wrong or right, but can only act because they have been programmed to do so. The authors conclude the article by saying that because struggling with moral issues is what gives

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<sup>1</sup> Duncan Purves, Ryan Jenkins, and Bradley J. Strawser, “Autonomous Machines, Moral Judgment, and Acting for the Right Reasons,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 18, no. 4 (2015): 851.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 855.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 860.

human lives meaning, it should be disturbing to think that a person's life could be determined by decisions made outside of personal immediate control.<sup>4</sup>

The stance held by Purves, Jenkins, and Strawser, that it is morally wrong to use autonomous weapons in war, is one that is supported through examples in studies conducted by others as well. Wayne A. Hunt<sup>5</sup>, professor of politics and international relations at Mount Allison University<sup>6</sup>, is one such person. In his article, "War and Peace in a Robotic Future," Hunt mentions how developments in machine technology and Artificial Intelligence worry many of the leading technological thinkers.<sup>7</sup> He also includes excerpts of an open letter sent to the International Joint Conference on Artificial Intelligence in Buenos Aires by these leading thinkers, addressing their worries.<sup>8</sup> Like Purves, Jenkins, and Strawser, the people who signed the open letter (including cosmologist Stephen Hawking, Steve Job's co-founder of Apple, Steve Wozniak, the chief executive of Google DeepMind, Demis Hassabism, and many others) believe that it is unethical to use autonomous weapons in war. They say, "If any major military power pushes ahead with AI weapon development, a global arms race is virtually inevitable, and the endpoint of this technological trajectory is obvious: autonomous weapons will become the Kalashnikovs of tomorrow."<sup>9</sup> The signers of the letter also believe that "autonomous weapons are ideal for tasks such as assassinations, destabilizing nations, subduing populations and selectively killing a particular ethnic group,"<sup>10</sup> thus supporting Purves, Jenkins, and Strawser's

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<sup>4</sup> Purves, Jenkins, and Strawser, "Autonomous Machines," 870.

<sup>5</sup> Wayne A. Hunt, "War and Peace in a Robotic Future," *Queen's Quarterly* 122 no. 4 (2015): 560.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 573.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 564.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 564.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 564.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 567.

belief that the use of autonomous weapons is morally wrong, though proving so with different reasons.

Another person who holds beliefs that supports the ones held by Purves, Jenkins, and Strawser is Hutan Ashrafian<sup>11</sup>. In his article, “Artificial Intelligence and Robot Responsibilities: Innovating Beyond Rights,” Ashrafian compares the moral responsibility of Artificial Intelligence with animals. He uses this comparison to show that both animals and robots, or AI agents, are used to fulfill specific tasks in order to meet human needs.<sup>12</sup> However, Ashrafian goes on to say that despite their similarities, “any direct moral comparison between sentient, rational artificial intelligence agents and robots with animals may prove superficial and problematic”<sup>13</sup> because animals cannot be charged with moral accusations.<sup>14</sup> In other words, like Purves, Jenkins, and Strawser, Ashrafian recognizes that AI agents “would have essential psychological qualities so as to make them both morally and legally responsible,”<sup>15</sup> and also recognizes the necessity and difficulty of ensuring “the fair, tolerant and ultimately human institution of advanced artificial intelligence and robots within mankind’s society.”<sup>16</sup>

In such ways, the ideas presented in the articles by Hunt and Ashrafian prove the credibility of the article by Purves, Jenkins, and Strawser. However, it is also important to note that the authors themselves prove the credibility of the article by the way in which they have constructed it. Overall, the organization of the article is very clear, cohesive, and logical. The authors hold a strong, solid position that the deployment of Autonomous Weapon Systems is

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<sup>11</sup> Hutan Ashrafian, “Artificial Intelligence and Robot Responsibilities: Innovating Beyond Rights,” *Science and Engineering Ethics* 21, no. 2 (2015): 317.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 321.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 321.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 322.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 322.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 326.

unethical, and the article is organized in such a way that the reasons for their objections are very clear. They introduce the topic and where they stand on the issue, list previous objections to AWS, then list their two main objections with detailed reasoning, and neatly conclude the article after a comparison between non-weaponized autonomous technology and AWS. The authors also engage with possible counterarguments and successfully articulate their points of disapproval. Because the article was concerned with the ethics and moral issues surrounding the use of AWS, the authors mainly relied on ethos to make their points, but there was also a lot of logos used in the article as well; the authors effectively used a balanced combination of the two. Finally, the authors used clear vocabulary and relevant examples, which allows the general audience to understand it well and relate to the information presented in the article.

Taking everything into account, it is safe to say that “Autonomous Machines, Moral Judgment, and Acting for the Right Reasons” by Duncan Purves, Ryan Jenkins, and Bradley J. Strawser was a successful article. Purves, Jenkins, and Strawser clearly state their views concerning autonomous weapons, and their views are proven to be valid when looking at them in comparison to what others studying the fields of Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence have to say. Wayne A. Hunt and Hutan Ashrafian both present ideas that support the belief held by Purves, Jenkins, and Strawser. The three authors also have constructed their article in such a way that is clear, reasonably convincing, and understandable for the general audience. Overall, the article was very well written, and it was engaging and thought-provoking. What if mankind could engage in battles without having to physically fight themselves? As appealing as that may sound, the alternative to it – the use of Autonomous Weapon Systems – proves to be clearly unethical. We are better off fighting our wars with our own hands.

### Bibliography

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