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Topic: The Context of Designing Moral Decision-Making Algorithms

A Response to Killing Made Easy: From Joysticks to Politics

By Emeritus Professor Noel Sharkey

Killer Robots: War in Life

The essay written by Professor Noel Sharkey essentially talks about the need for a preemptive prohibition on the development and use of “killer robots” on the battlefield, in the context of war. When all is said and done, fully autonomous weapons would then be able to engage and destroy targets with zero human intervention, thus increasing the risk of death and injury to civilians during armed conflicts.

In the essay, Professor Noel Sharkey shares his strong belief that a killer robot ban is necessary, with three main arguments. Firstly being Morality, “The idea of delegating a decision to kill to a machine is against human dignity.” Secondly being the limitations of Technology, “My biggest concerns are the ability to discriminate between civilians and the military. We’re nowhere near the ability to discriminate between civilians and other targets. Not in a real-life situation. Not in the fog of war.” Thirdly being the Principle of Proportionality, where it is one of the cornerstones in the principles of war, where I paraphrase, “You can kill civilians or damage civilian property in the essence of providing direct and concrete military advantage, and thus it's a balancing game where only humans can make such complex decisions, as it's abstract and not quantifiable.”

We would then need to be introduced to International Humanitarian Laws (IHL) which are essentially a set of rules which seeks to limit the effects of armed conflict. IHL protects persons who are not participating in hostilities and restricts the means and methods of warfare. Touted as being the law of armed conflicts, where most of it is contained in the Geneva Conventions and its fellow descendants, nearly every state in the world has agreed to be bound by them.

In essence, Professor Noel Sharkey strives to convince IHL to govern the development of said killer robots. On the whole, I do share the same sentiments and feelings of fear when it comes to these killer robots. However, I find it naive to believe that an agreement would be the be-all end-all. The reasons why I believe so is due to the limitations of international laws and ungovernable technological advancements.

There are limitations in international laws, where there is a lack of international governance. In practical terms, there is no enforcement mechanism that can force parties to abide by agreements, as international law tends to be the most honored and practiced only when it benefits all parties and violations cause disruptions that no one wants to see happen.

International laws are sometimes violated, in the case of the South China Sea disputes, where there is tension amongst many countries sharing the region, international law fails to stop China from claiming islands as theirs.

On a lighter note and as food for thought, we have all seen warnings that read “Hot surface, do not touch!”, does it physically stop you from touching the surface? For some, it awakens their inner child, and urges them to do the contrary instead.

Technological change is accelerating today at unprecedented speeds. Just like a car going at uncontrollable speeds, the same can be said for technology. The speed of technological advancements makes it rather uncontrollable and the fact is that no one can control what is created, where new technologies can both benefit and do harm at the same time.

A good example would be deepfake technology, where the technology could be used for good, where generative technology can create “fake” brain scans based on actual patient data, and then used to train algorithms to spot tumors in real images. It can also be abused when it gives the ability to superimpose anyone’s face onto pornographic content. Though there could be laws to govern these technologies, trying to put an end to the abuse of this technology would be an impossible battle as no one has the power, nor the ability to govern this.

With all that in mind, in this world of uncertainty, the creation of killer robots is not a matter of “if” they will ever be created but it’s a matter of when as military defence forces aim to deter aggression and involve the responsibility of protecting their people.

Sun Tzu who was a legendary military strategist in ancient China once said, “To know your Enemy, you must become your Enemy.” The central philosophy around it is that if you desire to have peace, you need to do so with war. He was one who advocated for military preparedness in maintaining peace and social order, in the same manner, for a country to ensure that others would not take advantage of them, they would then have to keep up to speed with the ever evolving technologies all over the world.

To conclude my response to “Killing Made Easy: From Joysticks to Politics” by Professor Noel Sharkey, I do share similar sentiments and feelings of fear with regards to the rise of these killer robots, however I do not agree with his belief that a ban would make much impact. As there are limitations of these international laws and ungovernable technological advancements, it would eventually result in a world where it is every country for themselves. Striving to protect themselves from the threat that arises from these killer robots, or even possibly developing killer robots of their own.