Homework 8: Ethics - Intelligent autonomous weapons

November 23, 2021

1 Should autonomous lethal weapons be banned, or subject to other forms of restrictions? First formulate at least three arguments with counterarguments for and against, and then explain which you consider most convincing and why.

Developing technology should not be banned in general, because the development of technology is what drives growth in our societies, and if growth stop we will stagnate which will effectively have worse consequences.

This is true, to some extent. Technology should not be banned in general, but if the consequences are that we increase the amount of suffering in the world by developing technology, perhaps it is a bad idea from an ethical perspective. This would be true from a utilitarian point of view.

Consider the case of developing the nuclear bomb. It was considered the end of humanity initially, but the technology have been used to a very limited extent. One could to some degree argue, that the severity of the technology creates an incentive to not engage in war, because of the devastating consequences of nuclear war. This incentive will continue, as long as there exists a terror balance between powerful regimes. And will not the same apply for autonomous weaponry?

While this being a valid argument for the nuclear bomb to some extent, due to how it actually counteracts war to some degree, I have two objections against this argument. First of all, even if nuclear haven't been used to a large degree this far, the severity of regimes engaging in nuclear conflict is so great that only one conflict could be enough to render humanity extinct. So even if conflict decreases to some degree initially, the potential for mass destruction has increased. My second counterargument would be, that the consequences of nuclear are always detrimental, and this is why we almost never use it. Autonomous weapons could be used on a small scale to begin with, and then escalate exponentially as we get more used to it as a society.

If we as an ethical society decides to ban the development of autonomous weapons, the only consequence of this will be that we render ourselves weaker than the societies that have a less ethical approach. Do we really want to create possibilities for unethical societies to exploit more ethical ones?

First of all, almost every society can justify their actions to be ethical in some manner. So why would we trust ourselves with that kind of technological power? One could consider this to be unwise. Second, even if a society does have a democratic society that is to some degree considered ethically acceptable, it isn't sure that future leadership in the same society will have similar beliefs. This is why autonomous weapons should be banned, because the potential for mass destruction increases. And even if we trust ourselves to handle such technologies in a responsible manner right now, we don't know who will be in control of these weapons in the future.

2 And as a follow-up, reflect on the extent of moral responsibility of an engineer or computer scientist for how the result of one's work is used.

I would not try to convince them or pressure them into having a particular ethical view. I would rather ask them to consult their own ethical perspective on the military and on the question of war. If this person believes for example that war is a necessary part of life, and that countries ability to defend themselves is of a greater good, then I wouldn't try to convince them to think otherwise. If they would on the other hand believe that war is wrong, then contributing to the military would be a bad idea for them personally, and in this case I would advice against doing so.