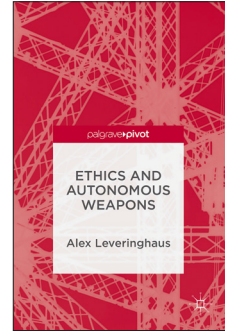


Book Reviews

ETHICS AND AUTONOMOUS WEAPONS



BY DR ALEX LEVERINGHAUS

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REVIEWED BY GROUP CAPTAIN MARK PHELPS

Biography: Group Captain Phelps was called to the Bar in 1994 and commissioned into the RAF in 2001. He has served as legal advisor in various guises both in the UK and abroad, he is also a CAS Fellow at King's College London working on his thesis looking at the legal, moral and ethical implications of cyber and autonomous warfare.

INTRODUCTION

The legal and ethical implications of autonomous weapons are no longer confined to the more esoteric reaches of academia, as concerns about the promise and potential threats inherent to such weapons have entered the mainstream to pose a conundrum for governmental policy makers. Whilst autonomous technologies have been championed in the civilian commercial sector through such diverse applications as robotic surgery and driverless cars, their potential for use by the military has raised difficult legal and ethical issues. Understood within a working definition that identifies such weapons by their ability (once programmed) to search for and engage a target without further direct intervention by a human operator, the challenges posed by autonomous weapons have been taken up by a number of civil society groups resulting in calls for an outright ban or alternatively the imposition of a moratorium on the development of the technology under the auspices of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons.

Against this background, Leveringhaus develops his ethical perspective on autonomous weapons technology drawing upon the Just War Tradition (JWT) as the main ethical framework for the regulation of armed conflict. In this way, he identifies the central

ethical implications of autonomous weapons in respect of the justification for the resort to armed conflict, the application of force during hostilities, and the potential consequences for the peace once hostilities have ceased. Leveringhaus takes the reader through the central concerns raised within the debate, such as whether autonomy will make war without risk a reality and, if so, will this lower the threshold for the resort to war for those possessing the technology? Whether, in the conduct of hostilities, autonomous weapons could ever meet the requirements of distinction, military necessity and proportionality? Whether the use of such weapons would undermine any peace that emerges after the conflict? And where responsibility would ultimately lie for any crimes, specifically war crimes, which may result from actions undertaken by an autonomous weapon. Having provided a general introduction to the key issues, Leveringhaus proceeds to undertake a more in-depth analysis of the central concepts.

In the second chapter, the author discusses the concepts of autonomy and what is meant by the term ‘weapon’ to look at whether autonomous weapons are unprecedented or can be seen as part of a continuum following on from previous precision guided systems. Leveringhaus goes on to analyse arguments in favour of the development and deployment of autonomous weapons and in particular the claim that removing human emotion from the execution of targeting decisions would reduce the potential for the making of mistakes. This claim is juxtaposed with the argument that the removal of the human from the targeting decision creates a responsibility gap in which no-one can be properly held liable for what an autonomous weapon does, thus, raising the prospect of war crimes being committed without the possibility of justice or retribution being made available to the victims.

In the fourth Chapter, Leveringhaus addresses what he terms the argument from human agency posing the much more difficult ethical question of whether there is something fundamentally morally objectionable in deploying a machine to kill another human being? This argument stands outside of those developed in the previous chapters, which may be characterised as fundamentally technologically dependent, based on the immaturity of the present systems rather than matters of wider ethical concern. Thus, when dealing with the argument from a human agency perspective, Leveringhaus takes as a starting point an assumption that any technological deficiencies that may cause an autonomous weapon to fall short of the present requirements of the law have been resolved. He goes on to pose the question of whether something morally valuable is lost when human agency, the ability to feel empathy or show mercy, when replaced by a machine and, if so, questions the consequences for the pursuit of a just war.

Leveringhaus pulls together the arguments developed throughout the book in the concluding Chapter to argue that much of the debate on autonomous weapons will rest upon how one conceptualises such weapons and to underline the important role

that ethical considerations must play, given the philosophical issues raised in respect of weapons that do not, as yet, exist.

Whilst not the first to tackle an ethical consideration of autonomous weapons, Leveringhaus has provided an important work that brings together in short form many of the central issues currently fuelling the debate. Written for an audience with a working knowledge of the Just War Tradition, *Ethics and Autonomous Weapons* is a work which would be appreciated by anyone wishing to make themselves more aware of the growing (and often nuanced) ethical and legal debate relating to the development of military technologies in general, and the challenges that are inherent to the development and deployment of autonomous weapons more specifically. There are areas of the debate that are not entered into, such as the crossover between autonomy and the ethics of cyberwarfare and the philosophical consequences of Artificial Intelligence, but the author is clear to put such issues to one side to focus his aim in addressing the more practical concerns of near-to-fruiting technologies, and this he achieves admirably.

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