Chapter 19
Military Robotics and Emotion: Challenges to Just War Theory

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter the author considers the complex moral interplay between unmanned systems, emotion, and just war theory. The first section examines technologically mediated fighting and suggests that through a process of moral-emotional disengagement and emotional desensitisation, any pre-existing barriers to immoral conduct in war may be reduced. Having considered the impact on the long distance warrior’s capacity or willingness to adhere to jus in bello norms, the author then examines the impact on the personal wellbeing of the operators themselves. Here, among other things, the author considers the impact of being simultaneously present in contrasting environments and argue that this, if nothing else, may lead to serious transgressions of just war principles. The fourth and final section asks whether we can eliminate or relieve some of these technologically mediated but distinctly human moral problems by further automating elements of the decision making process.

INTRODUCTION

War is an all-too-human affair and will probably always require the endangerment of human lives, but military robots known as ‘unmanned systems’ have begun to offest the human cost of war. However, their use is not without implication for just warfare. In this chapter I examine the efficacy of unmanned systems with a particular focus on the emotional and mindset-altering dimensions of unmanned warfare and their impact on the principal war-making agents, namely unmanned systems operators. This is because many of the unintended effects of this technology cannot be attributed to the machine, but to human psychology. In the first section, I examine some problems associated with technologically mediated fighting and suggest that through a process of moral disengagement and emotional desensitisation, the barriers to immoral conduct in war may also be reduced. Having considered the impact on the long distance warrior’s capacity or willingness to adhere to jus in bello norms, the second section examines the impact on the personal wellbeing of the operators themselves. Here, among other things, the impact of being simultaneously present...
ent in contrasting environments is considered in arguing that this, if nothing else, may lead to serious transgressions of just war principles. In the third and final section, I consider whether we can eliminate or relieve some of these technologically mediated but distinctly human moral problems by automating elements of the decision making process. It is concluded that while greater automation certainly has the potential to alleviate some moral concerns generated by these systems, there is a strong case for keeping humans in the decision making chain, even if it involves having to make a delicate moral tradeoff between maintaining and/or improving warfighting capability and limiting harm to noncombatants.

A BRIEF BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEM

While it is high-level decision makers that are central to the initial decision to engage in warfare, it is the individual soldier who defends his state and society that must be most unconditional in exercising moral restraint and adhering to just war theory. Michael Ignatieff (1998) writes that more than any other of war-making agential group, it is the soldiers who actually conduct war that have the most influence on its outcomes and the ability to introduce the moral component. In his words, ‘the decisive restraint on inhuman practice on the battlefield lies within the warrior himself – in his conception of what is honourable or dishonourable for a man to do with weapons’ (Ignatieff 1998, p. 118). Ironically, soldiers are the primary agents of both physical violence and compassion and moral arbitration in war. As Darren Bowyer (1998) remarks, they deliver ‘death and destruction one moment…[and deal] out succour to the wounded (of both sides) and assistance to the unwittingly involved civilian population, the next’ (p. 276). The specific concern examined here is whether by removing soldiers from the battlefield and training them to fight via a technologically mediated proxy we may, through a process of psycho-moral disengagement and emotional desensitisation, lower their ability or willingness to exercise restraint and compassion in warfare and adhere to the _jus in bello_ principles of discrimination and proportionality. It will be argued that the employment of unmanned systems tracks unethical decision-making and/or lowers barriers to killing, endangering the moral conduct of warfare.

Most, if not all, human beings are born with what can only be described as a primitive survival instinct that, without unchecked force, would lead to a degree of violence and savagery. But in most societies, people are raised and socialised in such a way that typically leads them to hold an aversion to harming other human beings. In a military context, this socialised reluctance to kill is evidenced by recounts and statistics from earlier wars. David Grossman (1995), a self-proclaimed ‘killogist’ or military psychologist, writes of two World War veterans. The first confirms that many WWI infantrymen never fired their weapons and relied instead on artillery, while the second says that platoon sergeants in WWII had to move up and down the firing line kicking men to get them to fire and that they felt they were doing good if they could ‘get two or three men out of a squad to fire’ (Grossman 1995, p. xiv). While some have criticised his methodology, S. L. A. Marshall gave further supporting evidence in arguing from personal experience and studies conducted on firing ratios, which revealed that ‘on average not more than 15 per cent of the men had actually fired at the enemy’ (Marshall 2000, p. 54). He attributed this startling inhibition to kill to an ‘ingrained fear of aggression’ that was based on society’s teaching that killing is fundamentally wrong (Marshall 2000, p. 71). For Marshall, success in combat and the welfare of the state and its people demanded that action be taken to correct or overcome this problem.

In the years following publication of the first edition of Marshall’s book – that is, in those following WWII – there is evidence that Marshall’s