

Automated killing in the digital era: a psychoanalytical reflection on warfare drones and related ethical issues

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The last years have witnessed a profusion in writings addressing moral and ethical issues when it comes to lethal weapons controlled by artificially intelligent machines, namely military robot and combat drones. One thing is obvious at the heart of this profusion: the many experts (from the Artificial Intelligence (AI), robotics, social sciences, military, and legal communities) are divided on this complex issue. Those who encourage the growing use of AI controlled lethal weapons as well as those who call for a ban on using them, rely on ethics and provide various moral arguments to support their cause. In an increasingly globalized and digitized world where many wars are happening while others threaten to start, the real-world military applications of technology ought to be examined, especially when the speed of technological progress and of its military use, drastically outpace moral and ethical analysis, thus pointing a generalized legal limbo which characterizes the issue at the international level.

This paper aims to reflect on the growing use of warfare drones (or unmanned aerial vehicles, UAV) from the viewpoint of psychoanalysis (S. Freud, D.W. Winnicott, J. Lacan, S. Tisseron, S. Turkle, J-P. Lebrun) and social sciences (M. Weber, E. Lévinas), thus raising certain ethical issues associated with them. We will first examine digitalization and AI at the light of psychoanalysis and explore their impact on mental states. With regards to the contemporary context under the reign of science, neoliberalism and images/screens, the alliance between AI, robotics and the military will be studied in order to learn more about the impacts of digitalization and automation on the representation of the act of killing via drones. The design and the use of drones will be analyzed using the psychoanalytic concepts of knowledge drive, death drive, omnipotence, sublimation, playing and reality. Furthermore, we will show how the technology can work as an operator of denial and question how the use of warfare drones deals with the commandment: « Thou shall not kill ».

Whereas most papers generally aim attention at drone operators, we choose to focus on space engineers by conducting a study based on semi-structured interviews with French engineers whose work is to design and program warfare drones. These interviews tackle various issues regarding the design of combat UAV, the imaginary, the fantasies and the anxieties related to them, their military use in the real world, the moral buffer and the responsibility of scientists. We explore the verbal (including Freudian slips) and the non-verbal (including smiles, laughter, hesitations, silence) contents of their discourse. Thus, we will examine how psychoanalysis can

inform the desire to design and create warfare drones. At last, we will reflect on some ethical dilemmas concerning the responsibility of the scientists and the characteristics of the “unmanned” and the “automated” in warfare drones.