

Drones in the Crosshairs

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Killing By Remote Control: The Ethics of an Unmanned Military, edited by Bradley Jay Strawser (forward by Jeff McMahan), (Oxford University Press), £32.50/\$47.45

The technologies of robotics and automation are having an epochal effect on the conduct of modern warfare. While the first remotely controlled aircraft and bombs were developed during the World Wars, it has taken a while for the technology to become robust enough to play a major role in armed conflict. This has changed dramatically in the last decade, and remotely controlled aircraft and other weapons systems now form a strong contingent in many armed forces around the world, most notably in the American military arsenal. Since warfare is such an ethically and morally fraught topic, it would seem natural that philosophers would be intensely engaged in the discussions regarding such massive technological change in the conduct of armed conflict. But this has not been the case, with only a handful of philosophy books and anthologies specifically addressing the ethical impacts of robotic weapons systems currently on the market. *Killing by Remote Control* is a very welcome addition to this field of study, with eleven new essays that probe both the promises and the perils of these new ways of killing from a distance.

Bradley Strawser is an assistant professor of philosophy in the Defense Analysis Department at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, and a research associate with the Oxford Institute for Ethics, Law, and Armed Conflict. These professional connections have allowed him to edit a carefully balanced volume containing international authors writing from both military and civilian vantage points, all with strong academic credentials. Strawser has also done an admirable job of selecting essays that are authoritative and well researched, yet also very readable even for the non-expert.

The reader will get more out of the book if she has some grounding in the main issues of just war theory, which is the ethical theory that seeks to ensure that wars are started for reasons that are just and fought in a manner that is ethically defensible. Although the authors assume previous knowledge of certain Latin terms used in the arguments (the origins of just war theory date back to the Early Middle Ages), a quick Internet search of unfamiliar terms is an easy fix for readers whose Latin may be a bit rusty. A major strength of the book is its freedom from explicit editorial bias toward drones and their use. The anthology includes essays from authors highly critical of the use of robotic weapons as well as those who argue that these weapons pose no special ethical problems. Regardless of the authors' particular political stances, each chapter offers an honest analysis of the use and potential misuse of robotic

weapons. Strawser has organized the chapters into three broad categories: the ethical justification of killing by remote control, the ethics of drone use, and the future of robotic weapons.

The first three essays deal with the more theoretical arguments surrounding the use of drones, beginning with an introduction for navigating the book and followed by two articles bringing the reader up-to-speed with the present debates. The main question at hand is whether just war theory is useful in dealing with these new weapons or whether it needs to be fully reworked to accommodate warfare's technological paradigm shift.

The substantial second section of the book addresses more specific issues relating to the current use of drones, including the ethics of targeted killing, the loss of military virtue through the use of drones, the justifiability of civilian deaths caused by drone operations, effective use of drones in counterinsurgency actions, ethical implications of asymmetrical risk in drone operations, and the ways in which drones might make going to war too easy.

The last section deals with the ethical problems associated with autonomous weapons systems, e.g., drones or other weapons that include autonomous target selection. These weapons are not simply remotely controlled but also make some decisions for themselves based on programming. These systems do not exist at the time of the writing of this book but represent a possible future landscape of unmanned weapons. This section contains one chapter by Stephen Kershner (pp. 229-245), which seeks to defeat the claim that drones have special ethical import. Kershner argues that our fear of autonomous weapons is largely misguided and that these machines cannot make their own moral decisions since they are just complex tools with no more moral agency than any other simpler tool. While this chapter is well argued, Kershner seems to be forgetting that when it comes to autonomous weapons and semi-autonomous drones, we are moving from a tool that passively interacts with the world through the direct actions of a user to one that actually communicates to its operator a preferred course of action in its own use. Autonomous tools or weapons are dramatically different from simple tools and pose very challenging moral questions and responsibilities in their design and operation.

The book is very solid as is but it would have been nice to have heard from authors arguing from a Middle Eastern or Asian perspective. To counter this small weakness, the book is particularly strong in passionately arguing that those who are the design, building and using these weapons are not paying enough attention to the moral implications of their actions. George R. Lucas even suggests in his chapter that the continued willful ignorance displayed in the engineering community towards the scientific resolution of these critical moral issues, "...constitutes a serious lapse of professional ethics and must henceforth be recognized as professionally inexcusable for practitioners in the field of

military robotics engineering to remain unaware, unconcerned, and uninvolved in this scientific research” (pg. 227) Let us hope the arguments for professional responsibility presented in this important volume do not fall on deaf ears, and that this book helps move this debate forward.