Ethics and policy in pace with science and technology

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Weapons Ethics: War Fighting Morality and Advanced Technology

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The United States has been involved in some form of active conflict for the entire lives of today’s university students and the last decade in particular has been one of a brutal and bloody war against a variety of enemies in Iraq, Afghanistan, and in the shadowy world of terrorists. The milieu in which today’s student, soldier, or young officer exists is one of global instability, economic upheaval, political polarization, and breathtakingly rapid technological change on a scale not seen in several generations. The evolution of technology, and in particular war-fighting technology, has been so fast as to outstrip our collective ability to absorb its implications.

Employed and emerging technologies

The most well-known, but not the only, worrisome advance has been the unabated growth in the use of armed drones in combat. Much has been written and debated about the growing dependence on unmanned vehicles and on the policies for their use. Further, aggressive programs of research and development are underway to provide those aerial drones and others with the autonomous ability to decide on and apply lethal force.

At the same time, implants, pharmaceuticals, and genetic modifications are in development, which will fundamentally alter the human body and dramatically enhance soldiers’ combat performance. Cyberwarfare, in which computers, communications, and networks are employed to attack an enemy’s weapons and perhaps their infrastructure, is a rapidly growing capability and a serious concern. The collection and automated mining and analysis of mind-boggling amounts of data—Big Data—raise legitimate issues of what constitutes legitimate “analysis” and, importantly, raise real concerns about privacy and civil liberties. To understate it somewhat, these developments should at least give us pause.

Ethical and moral considerations

There are a host of legitimate reasons given to pursue the broad menu of technologies for our military and intelligence forces, among them a desire to reduce both combatant and non-combatant casualties and to gain a qualitative technological advantage. However, the employment of some of the more advanced technologies, and even the research, needs to be accompanied by careful thought about their ethical and moral implications.

Will our ability to conduct combat-at-a-distance change the thought process by which we decide to engage in war? Will the development of autonomous killing machines and artificially enhanced soldiers fundamentally change the nature of conflict and perhaps put at risk our conceptions of humanity? Are Just War Theory and the Laws of Armed Conflict relevant in today’s high tech and computerized world? As technology races ahead, can our training, education, policies, and laws keep pace?

These are just a few of the thorny and important questions which must be addressed in universities, military academies and, indeed, in the decision-making levels of government.

The problem in context

On Sept 11, 2001, the United States experienced a cataclysmic event, which set off a series of violent conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and across the globe in pursuit of terrorists. As a result, and for the better part of a decade, investments skyrocketed in a host of ever-advanced war-fighting technologies. Large expenditures on not just weapons, but advanced warfighting technologies, are nothing new. Through the very serious existential worries and ever more powerful nuclear weapons of the Cold War, the Strategic Defense Initiative (Star Wars) of the 1980s, the high-tech Desert Storm war, and the “Shock and Awe” of the Iraq invasion, there has been a fascination with, and an increasing reliance on new technologies.

Ballistic missile defense technologies are truly amazing, but many have written about concerns...
over their destabilizing influence and fretted over the enormous cost. Stealth fighters and amazingly accurate bombs and missiles made quick work of the first Gulf War, but many worried about the appearance that it had become a “video-game,” “television” event. Paraphrasing a current well-known combatant commander, “it seems our soldiers and commanders are becoming addicted to better and better technologies and are forgetting how to think about other solutions.”

In the last decade, there have been far too frequent reports of a series of apparent high-level ethical lapses, to include heavily publicized issues of prisoner abuse, possible torture, and the debate over proper use of intelligence gathering authorities. This, combined with an absence of debate about the ethical propriety of some technology research, suggests a need for change. Many senior military and intelligence leaders, while well intentioned and intensely mission focused – and always aware of questions of legality – do not seem similarly concerned about issues of ethics.

Ignoring the ethical implications of weapons technologies is a mistake. Today’s cadets and young officers pursuing technical careers need the study of history, philosophy, and literature to think more broadly about issues of war and peace, and violence and negotiation. Grounding in the humanities complements other military and intelligence training and is necessary for producing well balanced and humane leaders.

A solution at the University of Notre Dame

The Reilly Center for Science, Technology, and Values at the University of Notre Dame, which has as one of its primary missions to educate students in the proper use of science as a force of good in the world, oversees a research initiative entitled Emerging Technologies of National Security and Intelligence (ETNSI). Among the many facets of the program are research, outreach, public lectures and, of course, teaching. The program brings to the campus leading thinkers and national figures to discuss important questions of weapons and ethics. Reilly Center faculty members participate in accomplished groups and consortia of academics, industry leaders, and government officials organized to discuss these important issues.

For three years, the Reilly Center has developed and the Department of Philosophy has offered an elective course in Weapons Ethics. The University of Notre Dame requires that all students take two courses in theology and two courses in philosophy as a requirement for graduation and Weapons Ethics is a popular choice. This course, for which I serve as an Adjunct Faculty member, is heavily subscribed and its students range from ROTC cadets to peace studies majors, from philosophy majors to engineers.

While it has evolved somewhat from year to year, the course essentially teaches students about the emerging set of new war-fighting technologies and attempts to overlay discussion of them onto the tenets of Just War Theory, the Law of Armed Conflict, International Humanitarian Law, and the Fundamentals of Ethics. Students read from Thucydides, Kant, Augustine, Ghandi, and Hobbes, among others. The instructors first describe the inherent value and advantages of the selected technologies then open the dialogue about their possible ethical implications.

Instructors do not take positions on the issues. Rather, we provide the students a framework to draw their own conclusions. I have observed that the students have a surprisingly clear and sometimes nuanced understanding of the advantages and problems wrought by the technology tsunami and are hungry for conceptual frameworks to deal with them.

While the vast majority of university students will never serve in the military and will, hopefully, never have to experience combat, the leaders of the University of Notre Dame’s Reilly Center for Science, Technology, and Values agree with and have embraced my desire to expose them – most for the first time – to the difficult and complex issues of the ethics of war. Eventually, these students will be the leaders of industry, government, and academia and will carry with them, and base their actions on, understanding and sensitivity, which they likely would never have gotten otherwise, to these very important issues.

The University of Notre Dame has active and highly regarded programs in international security, as well as in peace studies. It conducts defense sponsored research and at the same time is actively
engaged in global development and global health programs. The enthusiastic embrace of the study and teaching of ethics, as it relates specifically to national security technologies reflects a keen understanding of an important national need and a commitment to a technically strong, but also morally strong, national defense.

Highlights

- Warfighting today is far different, both quantitatively and qualitatively than in previous eras.

- The pace of technology advancement is far outstripping that of policy, law, regulation, and, most importantly, ethical analysis.

- Decision makers, while well intentioned and rightfully concerned about legal issues of weapons, spend less time in reflection on whether a technology or its use in warfare is ethical.

- Today’s students are exposed to a plethora of advanced technologies, but spend little time thinking about their use in war. Indeed, students rarely have any engagement in issues of war or violent conflict.

- The centuries old Just War Theory and the well-known Laws of Armed Conflict, International Humanitarian Laws, and well-established theories of ethics provide an excellent framework on which to overlay and debate issues arising from new warfighting technologies.

About the author

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References


This publication uses Avenir for titles and sidebar information, and Revival 565 for body copy and reference information.

Design by Jeff Ganger of Non-Affiliated.
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The Reilly Center Reports is a collection of reports addressing the ethical, social, legal, and policy implications of science and technology. It is produced by the John J. Reilly Center for Science, Technology, and Values at the University of Notre Dame.