



Centro Internazionale di Studi Umanistici “Umberto Eco”

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Autonomous weapon systems and moral responsibility

Abstract. Must the development and use of lethal autonomous weapon systems – or intelligent ‘killer robots’ – be prohibited by international law? In a landmark article, Robert Sparrow (2007) provides reasons why we should respond to this question in the affirmative. His central argument – the *Argument from Responsibility Gaps* – goes thus: The principles of just war theory require the possibility of ascribing moral responsibility to combatants or their superiors. When a lethal autonomous weapon system (LAWS for short) commits a war crime, nobody can be justly held responsible – neither the system itself, nor the commanding officer or the programmer. Hence, autonomous weapon systems must be prohibited by international law. Sparrow presents his argument as one of brute conceptual necessity. Problematically, a wave of empirical experiments exploring folk ascriptions of moral responsibility in the context of LAWS pose a serious challenge to the argument thus conceived.

Markus Kneer is an Ambizione Fellow at the University of Zurich, leading a research team that explores questions at the interface of AI, the law, moral psychology and philosophy of mind. He completed his PhD at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in philosophy, and previously held positions at the University of Pittsburgh and Columbia University.

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