

# AI expert calls on colleagues to take a stand on autonomous killer robots

May 28 2015, by Bob Yirka

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Artificial Intelligence expert and professor at the University of California, Stuart Russell, has published a Comment piece in the journal *Nature*, calling out colleagues to take a stand on the development of

lethal autonomous weapons systems (LAWS)—armed robots that enter the battlefield without human masters and make decisions about who to kill. He suggests the technology is developed enough now that it is time those in the field, such as roboticists, AI experts and computer scientists, step up and take a stand regarding the development of such systems.

Currently, drones in the battlefield are armed and are used to kill and cause damage—but all of them are merely extensions of a human being; a human pilot sits remotely at the controls steering the craft and pressing buttons that cause munitions to be deployed. But that could change very soon, Russell notes, a variety of scientists are working on projects that could very well lead to LAWS, and thus far, nothing has been done to add a voice to whether it is something that should happen.

From a purely military perspective, LAWS make sense—why send in human piloted craft or foot soldiers when a robot could do the job, saving the human soldier from possibly being killed? But of course, it is not as simple as that, every country has rules about humans killing humans, whether it covers civilians killing one another or soldiers killing as an act of war. In all cases, it is expected that humans are able to tell the difference, and to behave according to some sort of established rules. In private life, people are restricted by laws—in warfare, soldier behavior is governed by commanders, international law and oftentimes the court of worldwide opinion. But allowing LAWS to make such decisions, to choose who to kill, Russell argues, would violate fundamentals of human dignity. He suggests that the [scientific community](#) has a duty to take a position on such technology, presumably against it—noting how physicists around the world have banded together to state their opposition to [nuclear weapons](#), and how other scientist groups have worked together to help outlaw chemical and [biological weapons](#) and laser weapons that could blind soldiers. Such a movement needs to be started, he argues, at all levels of the scientific community to debate the merits or failings of LAWS and to make public their

views—failure to do so, he insists, would be akin to nodding silently as such weapons are developed and eventually deployed.

**More information:** Robotics: Ethics of artificial intelligence, *Nature*, [www.nature.com/news/robotics-e ... intelligence-1.17611](https://www.nature.com/news/robotics-ethics-artificial-intelligence-1.17611)

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