Delegating Death: Autonomous Weapon Systems and Moral Dilemma

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Abstract

The emergence of autonomous weapon systems (AWS) presents a critical lens for examining the evolving relationship between technological innovation and ethical concerns in modern warfare. The study investigates whether the delegation of lethal authority to AWS constitutes an ethical advancement or a departure from the ethical foundations of war. Drawing on just war theory, technological determinism, constructivism, and the security dilemma concept, the study evaluates key ethical dimensions, including distinction, proportionality, and responsibility, alongside structural drivers of technological adoption within the international system. A qualitative, theory-driven approach is employed, relying on documentary analysis of scholarly literature and policy debates. Historical comparison with earlier military transformations, including the introduction of machine guns, aerial bombardment, and nuclear weapons, provides a framework for situating contemporary developments within recurring patterns of ethical contestation and adaptation. Findings indicate that AWS generate significant moral dilemmas, particularly concerning accountability, moral responsibility, and the distancing of human judgement from decisions involving lethal force. At the same time, AWS offer potential humanitarian benefits through enhanced precision, reduced collateral damage, and improved protection of military personnel. The study demonstrates that ethical concerns associated with AWS reflect broader historical patterns in which emerging technologies provoke resistance prior to incorporation into military practice. The study concludes that the delegation of lethal authority to AWS represents neither an ethical advancement nor a complete departure from ethical foundations. Rather, AWS signify a reconfiguration of moral responsibility within technologically mediated

warfare, reinforcing the trajectory of adaptation that has characterised the evolution of armed conflict.

Keywords: Autonomous Weapon Systems; Moral Responsibility; Just War Theory; Ethical Dilemmas; Security Dilemma.

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1.0 Introduction

The history of humanity provides evidence for the consistent formation of complex social phenomena due to interactions between different individuals and groups. One of the phenomena that continues to form and cause great consequences is warfare which has affected humanity for generations (Roy & Charney, 2024). War continues to transform in relation to advancements in technology. Conflict in medieval times was based on physical confrontations, that is unarmed combat, with basic weapons such as stones, sticks, and clubs (Contamine, 2005; Keegan, 1994). Overtime, the nature and magnitude of conflicts changed as a result of advancements in engineering and chemistry which gave rise to the development of gun powder and armour. The advent of guns brought changes in terms of accuracy and distance with respect to weapons (Andrade, 2015).

One of the most defining moments that took place during the evolution of warfare is the advent of industrialisation. This period took warfare out of the bounds of man power, geographic and seasonal considerations to become an age of mass production and attrition of technology. The creation of mechanised weaponry such as machine guns, tanks and aircraft increased the range of destruction and escalated warfare. The invention of nuclear weapons enabled the capability to cause destruction on an unprecedented scale, leading to devastation on the level of entire cities (Pomarede, 2026; Hacker, 2005). At each one of the stages of evolution of the military technology there was an array of ethical and moral dilemmas especially concerning the question of justification of increasingly destructive powers. Current technological progress has given way to a new era which is characterised by the development of autonomous weapon systems (AWS) such as drones and robots designed for carrying out combat tasks.

The increasing use of AWS in military applications has led to many ethical dilemmas surrounding the use of the technology. Many ethical issues arise from the use of AWS, especially those that relate to the delegation of life-or-death decisions to machines, the accountability gap that could arise due to lack of responsibility, and the regulation of organised violence (Caton, 2015). However, AWS proponents focus on various strengths of AWS, such as improved accuracy, lower danger of military personnel, and improvements in compliance with rules of armed conflict (Guo, 2025).

1.1 Problem Statement.

Rapid advances in AWS have outpaced the development of comprehensive ethical and legal frameworks capable of governing deployment and use. Existing scholarship within security studies, international humanitarian law, and moral philosophy often addresses concerns such as proportionality, distinction, and accountability (Dinstein, 2016; Solis, 2016). Historical experience further demonstrates that successive military innovations have generated ethical contestation which, however, ultimately became embedded within warfare (Keegan, 1994; Walzer, 1978; Horowitz, 2010).

There is a key tension due to the increasingly detached nature of the use of lethal force and moral responsibility. In classical ethical considerations, the presence of an actor (human-in-the-loop) with responsibility and judgment is implicit. However, the employment of AWS creates decision-making systems devoid of consciousness, moral consideration, and context (Coeckelbergh, 2010). Consequently, a major void is the lack of an integrated ethical framework that can take into consideration the far-reaching consequences of delegating lethal force to AWS. Furthermore, insufficient attention has been devoted to the issue of distributed responsibility and human intention.

The consequence of such a gap is the potential undermining of established norms governing the use of force, alongside the risk of normalising technologically efficient yet morally weakened forms of organised violence. Without conceptual and institutional adaptation, accountability may become diffused beyond meaningful attribution, weakening both legal enforcement and ethical restraint.

Flowing from the above, the study interrogates the central question: whether delegating lethal authority to AWS constitutes an ethical advancement or a departure from the ethical foundations of war. The central argument advanced is that AWS represent an enduring feature of contemporary and future warfare. Accordingly, the objective of the study is to critically evaluate the moral dilemma of preserving accountability in an era of autonomous conflict.

1.2 Analytical and Conceptual Framework

A critical analysis of AWS and the ethical issues associated with delegating the use of lethal force needs to be done using a well-defined concept and analytical framework. The concept and analytical framework give the much-needed framework for understanding how the relationship between capability and morality in contemporary war can be interpreted. A clear analytical and conceptual framework is needed for understanding the ethical issues that come with AWS and delegation of lethal force. The framework brings together concepts of definition, the principles of warfare and theoretical underpinnings.

AWS can be defined as systems whose platforms can target and attack the intended enemy automatically once the AWS has been activated. The UN has identified different types of levels of autonomy for AWS depending on the extent to which human beings can operate the platforms without any human intervention even in highly challenging operational conditions (United Nations, 2025; Amoroso & Tamburrini, 2020; Taddeo & Blanchard, 2022). The analytical differences include human-in-the-loop,

human-on-the-loop, and human-out-of-the-loop depending on the extent of human involvement in the decision-making process (Amoroso & Tamburrini, 2020; Roff & Moyes, 2016). As human participation decreases, there is a rise in autonomy, resulting in increased ethical concerns but at the same time, enhanced efficacy and reactivity. The distinctions can be contextualised through African ethical traditions concerning warfare, which emphasise collective responsibility and restraint in the use of force. The traditions include South Africa's Ubuntu ethics, the conflict resolution strategies of the Ewe ethnic group of Ghana that prioritise dialogue, reconciliation, and the maintenance of social harmony, and the communal responsibility and consensus of the Akan ethnic group also of Ghana.

The ethical analysis of AWS can be centred on three principles of Just War Theory, specifically *jus in bello*, as articulated by Walzer (1978). Distinction, proportionality, and responsibility form the basis of the legitimacy of the actions in the course of warfare. The principle of distinction implies that there should be a distinction between combatants and non-combatants, thus limiting the use of force only to legitimate targets. Technological advancements such as sensor capabilities, data analytics, and image processing associated with AWS enable more effective target identification under battle conditions. The principle of proportionality states that the expected benefit must be greater than incidental harm to civilians. Algorithmic processing and data integration facilitate more accurate assessments of the collateral damage, though some ethical issues remain related to the inclusion of value judgements into computational frameworks. The principle of responsibility means that accountability for the use of force is necessary. The introduction of AWS makes traditional assumptions about individual responsibility questionable but does not eliminate individual responsibility since the chain of accountability can be traced through command structures, system development, and the rules of engagement. Table 1 summarises the main principles of *jus in bello* and the use of AWS within Just War Theory.

Table 1: Application of Jus in Bello Principles to AWS

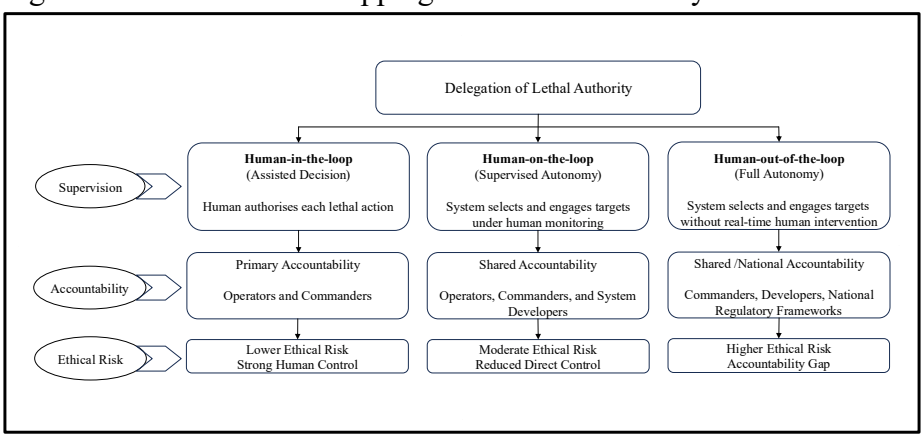
	Definition	Relevance to AWS	Ethical Implications
Distinction	Requires differentiation between combatants and non-combatants	Advances in sensor technology, data processing, and pattern recognition enhances target identification under operational conditions	Improvement in compliance with humanitarian norms
Proportionality	Anticipated destruction must not outweigh the good achieved by the war	Algorithmic processing and real-time data integration enable more precise collateral damage assessments	Raises concerns about how value judgements are encoded in computational systems and whether machines can appropriately weigh human harm
Responsibility	Requires clear attribution of accountability for the use of force	AWS complicate traditional notions of individual culpability but responsibility can be distributed across commanders, developers, and operational frameworks	Accountability remains possible but becomes diffused, raising legal and moral challenges in assigning blame

Source: Author's Construct (2026).

Key to the present discussion is the issue of delegation of lethal authority, defined here as the delegation of the decision-making authority over the use of lethal force from humans to technology. Delegation may range from assisted decision-making, supervised autonomy, and fully

autonomous engagement. In lower degrees of delegation, decisions are predominantly informed by human judgement aided by computational technology. In higher degrees of delegation, decisions are predominantly made by algorithms allowing for fast and adaptive decisions in dynamic environments (Amoroso & Tamburrini, 2020; Roff, 2014). However, ethical concerns can emerge as a result of the seeming transfer of moral intervention from humans to machines. Yet, one should consider that the modern combat environment requires faster decision-making capabilities and more computing power than what is available to humans. Thus, delegation does not mean a shift of responsibilities but rather the redefinition in the context of intertwined human and technological systems. Figure 1 illustrates a decision tree representing the delegation of lethal authority and concrete accountabilities of humans operating such systems. Human-in-the-loop systems imply direct operator responsibility, while greater autonomy translates into accountability of commanders, developers and even states.

Figure 1: Decision-Tree Mapping Levels of Autonomy



Source: Author's Construct (2026).

The research will employ an analytic framework underpinned by three theoretical perspectives. The **Just War** theory is the underlying framework within which the ethical permissibility of acts in warfare is judged.

The Theory of **Technological Determinism** advanced by Veblen (1990) and Ayres (1962) will explain why new technologies are continually integrated into military operations despite early resistance due to ethical considerations. Finally, the theory of **Constructivism** will explain how new norms, values, and institutional practices influence the acceptance and regulation of AWS within the international community (Wendt, 2016). In the African context, constructivist dynamics are evident in norm-building processes within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU), where ideas of security and collective responsibility shape regional policy discourse on emerging technologies and warfare. Alongside the above-mentioned three theoretical perspectives, **Security Dilemma** concept serves as a secondary perspective used in the analysis of AWS. Security Dilemma demonstrates how fear of losing a relative advantage and striving for gaining the advantage become a driving force for AWS development even in the context of ethics (Herz, 1950; Jervis, 1978). Such a perspective supports the theory of Technological Determinism by justifying the necessity for the proliferation of AWS. The combination of structural perspectives enables a balanced assessment of AWS as both a product of technological evolution and a subject of ethical concern. In Table 2, the three complementary theoretical perspectives and one concept underpinning the analytical framework are outlined.

Table 2: Theoretical Framework for the Analysis of AWS

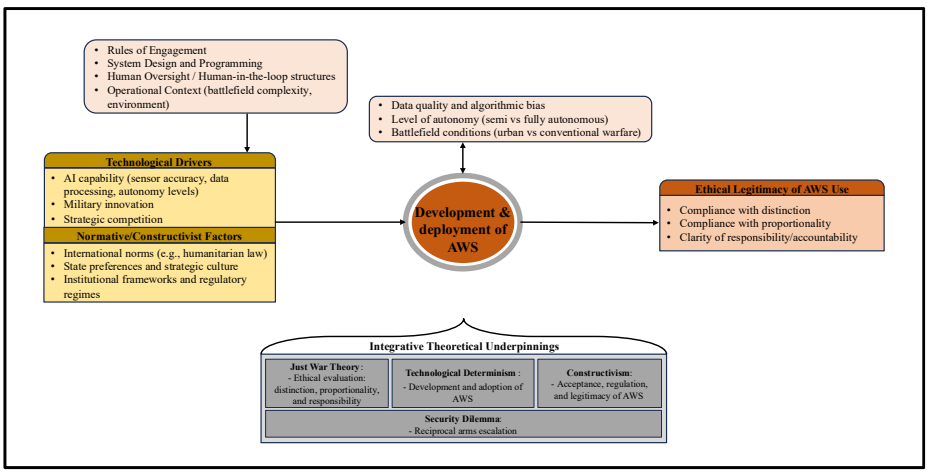
Theoretical Perspective	Core Focus	Relevance to AWS	Analytical Contribution
Just War Theory	Provides criteria for evaluating ethical permissibility in the conduct of warfare	Establishes the standards for assessing the legitimacy of AWS	Enables ethical evaluation of AWS within established moral and legal frameworks
Technological Determinism	Explains how technological innovation shapes the military and strategic behaviour	Highlights structural pressures that drive the adoption of AWS despite ethical concerns	Frames AWS as an inevitable outcome of military-technological evolution
Constructivism	Emphasises the role of norms, values, and institutional practices in international relations	Explains how global attitudes, legal regimes, and discourse shape the acceptance and regulation of AWS	Illuminates the social construction of legitimacy and the evolution of governance frameworks for AWS
Security Dilemma (Secondary Lens)	Examines how perceived threats and relative security concerns drive arms acquisition	Explains why states may rapidly adopt AWS even amid ethical concerns	Supports the argument that AWS adoption is structurally and strategically persistent

Source: Author's Construct (2026).

1.3 Conceptual Framework. Figure 2 below shows the conceptual framework that forms the basis of the study. Technological drivers, which include AI capabilities, military innovation, and strategic competition, as well as normative and constructivist factors, including international norms, state preferences, and institutions, constitute the independent variables which influence the development and deployment of AWS as

the dependent variable at the explanatory level. The intervening variables which include aspects such as rules of engagement, system design, and human oversight, shape the operation of AWS and influence ethical outcomes. At the evaluative level, the dependent variable in the framework is the ethical legitimacy of AWS use, which is determined based on adherence to the principles of distinction and proportionality, as well as the maintenance of responsibility and accountability. The theoretical framework underpinning the framework includes Just War Theory, Technological Determinism, Constructivism, and Security Dilemma concept.

Figure 2: Conceptual Framework for the Ethical Evaluation and Adoption of AWS



Source: Author's Construct (2026).

In line with the framework, the study advances the proposition that increasing degrees of autonomy, if placed in strong institutional and legal contexts, can improve accuracy, minimise the risk of human injury, and enhance compliance with ethical principles. Such a proposition is not a departure from the ethical traditions of war but rather represents an evolutionary adaptation in the nature of conflict, whereby the role of humanity is not diminished but merely reshaped. The proposition aligns

with historical antecedents where new technology, although ethically controversial, has been incorporated into existing systems of armed conflict.

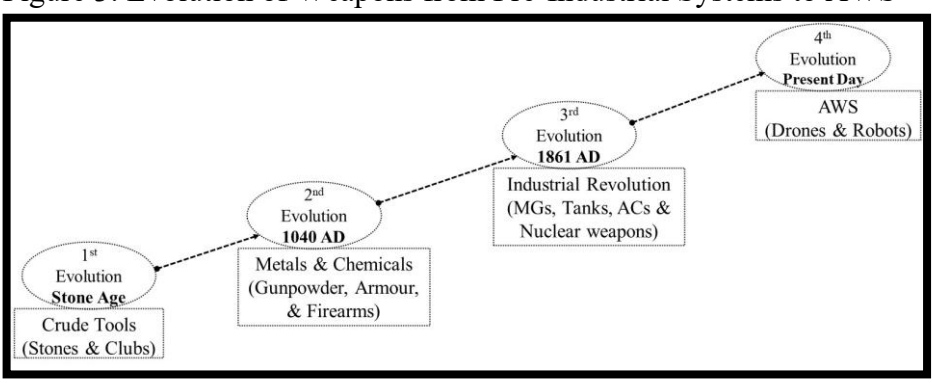
1.4 Methodological Approach. The study adopted a qualitative and theory-based research design to analyse the ethics and strategic characteristics of AWS. Data were gathered from secondary sources such as scientific papers, governmental reports and documents. The inclusion criteria were relevance and scholarly credibility while the criteria for exclusion were non-reviewed sources. Coding of the data was through thematic organisation based on ethical assessment, technological drivers, and morality. Deductive coding technique was used based on data provided by the theoretical framework and other studies. The conceptual framework illustrated the relations between variables including technological capabilities, regulatory environment and ethical results. Comparisons of historical cases happened through criteria of technological development, changes in military technology, and ethical discussion. The limitations of the research include the use of secondary data and the rapidly evolving nature of AWS. Nonetheless, the methodology provided a good foundation in analysing AWS as a technological development and ethical concern of modern warfare.

2.0 Evolution of Warfare and Recurring Ethical Concern

Technological innovation and concepts of organised violence have always been part of an ever-evolving interaction in relation to warfare. Warfare prior to the industrial era mainly depended on man-to-man combat involving constraints such as physical presence, a restricted range of movement, and minimal level of mechanical involvement. As observed by Walzer (1978) and Keegan (1994), ethics associated with the scenarios have always involved human responsibility and accountability where judgements and intentions involved individuals conducting combat operations.

In order to situate the evolution of weapons within a broader historical trajectory, Figure 3 illustrates the gradual development of weapons used in warfare through four phases up to AWS as a definitive characteristic of modern warfare. The first phase is identified by the use of simple tools such as rocks and clubs in order to denote a time when warfare was carried out by way of physical interaction with minimal technology involved. The second phase is identified by the use of metal and chemistry in the form of gun powder, armours and firearms in order to increase the scope and lethal nature of the warfare being carried out. The third phase corresponds with the era of industrialisation in which warfare involved the use of machine guns, tanks, aircraft, and nuclear weapons which involved a mechanised process and high-level destruction. The fourth phase which marks the current age is one where AWS are used characterised by drones and robots used for military operations with different levels of autonomy. AWS employ artificial intelligence, algorithms, and advanced sensor systems to identify, track, and engage targets based on predefined parameters (Keegan, 1994; Keeley, 1996).

Figure 3: Evolution of Weapons from Pre-Industrial Systems to AWS



Source: Author's Construct (2026).

The advent of industrialisation was a turning point in terms of the scope and impact of war. The process of mechanised production ensured that there could be mass production of weaponry, and scientific advancements

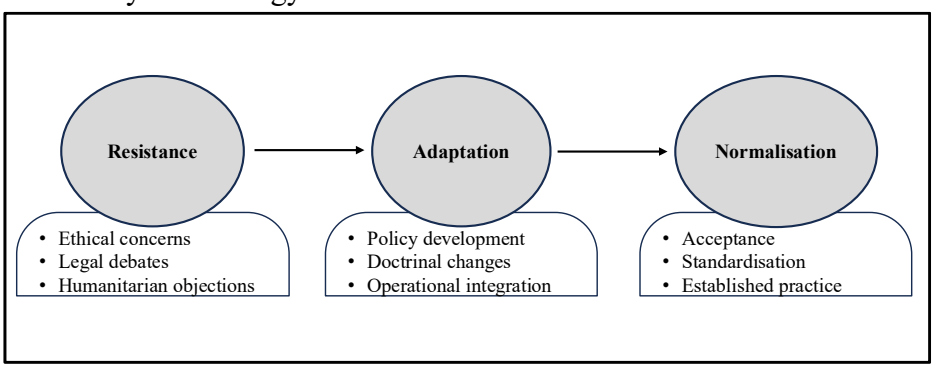
led to machine guns, artillery, and armoured vehicles that were capable of producing an immense level of destruction (Hacker, 2005). The development of warfare in the air further transformed the nature of strategy and ethics, as airpower enabled the projection of force beyond the boundaries of a battlefield. Additionally, with the advent of nuclear weaponry, there have been changes in the nature of strategy and ethics, which is reflected in the capability of instant large-scale destruction that could destroy entire city populations (Walzer, 1978; Keegan, 1994).

The invention of the machine guns during the industrial age sparked a lot of moral issues owing to the potential for rapid and mass slaughter. A case in point is the invention of the Gatling gun in the 19th century. The Gatling gun is a rapid fire, multiple barrel weapon that was first invented in America in 1861 by Richard Jordan Gatling. Gatling gun is based on a cyclic multi-barrel mechanism with six barrels turning around a central shaft and is capable of firing 200 rounds per minute. The gun was first used in the American Civil War and in subsequent wars like the Anglo-Zulu war (Hogg, 2002; Wahl & Toppel, 1978). Some critics argued that such weapons were against the principles of proportionality and discrimination because of the propensity for uncontrollable destruction. The critics further questioned civilian immunity and the erosion of ethical restraint in the development of aerial bombardment where urban centres were targeted.

The advent of nuclear weapons increased the moral controversy to an unparalleled extent. The destructive power of nuclear weapons undermined the very tenets of the Just War Theory, especially the principle of discrimination. Total destruction seemed morally impossible in light of traditional moral codes regulating the conduct of wars (Walzer, 1978). Nevertheless, nuclear weapons became embedded within strategic doctrines, particularly through deterrence theory, illustrating a pattern in which ethical contestation does not prevent technological adoption.

A consistent trend can be identified within the whole process of military transformation. The initial introduction is often marked by moral resistance based on fears about legal issues, legitimacy and humanitarian consequences. The resistance is followed by the period of adaptation, when the legal, doctrinal and operational procedures are adapted to take into account the new technologies. Eventually, technologies get normalised and accepted as a part of war despite any ethical fears expressed before. Constructivist perspectives highlight how standard frameworks change via reinterpretation and institutionalisation, while technological determinism demonstrates the necessity and structural pressures leading to technology adoption. Figure 4 presents the consistent pattern of resistance, adaptation and normalisation.

Figure 4: Recurring Pattern of Resistance, Adaptation, and Normalisation of Military Technology Transformations



Source: Author's Construct (2026).

Taking into account the historical and analytic framework, the development of AWS reflects the existing patterns of technology integration. Autonomous weapons in warfare can be used to engage a target with or without direct human intervention based on algorithms, artificial intelligence and sensors that identify the target against a pre-set profile (Caton, 2015). The operational environment covers the land, marine, underwater, air and space domains. Variations of autonomy exist,

from those that need human permission for using lethal force to those that can select and engage the target independently. The examples of such technology are unmanned aerial vehicles that conduct surveillance, reconnaissance and attacks, sometimes performing independent targeting. Similarly, there are autonomous ground vehicles that carry out logistics, reconnaissance and attacks, some of them independently attacking. Lethal AWS are considered to be the most disputable type of warfare technology due to the ability to conduct operations independently (Amoroso & Tamburrini, 2020; Roff & Moyes, 2016; Caton, 2015).

Ethical concerns with regard to AWS relate to earlier discussions, especially with respect to delegating the decision to kill and the resultant deterioration in human judgment. Ethically, from a Just War theory perspective, there are doubts with respect to how autonomous weapons can maintain distinction, proportionality, and accountability. However, developments in processing power, sensor capabilities, and precision algorithms make AWS likely an improved system in target discrimination and operational efficiency, thus maintaining ethics.

Structural and strategic imperatives also sustain the continued relevance of AWS in modern warfare. Security dilemma is a concept that demonstrates how the actions of one state to increase security through technological innovation results in threat perceptions for other nations, leading to adoption (Jervis, 1978). Realist arguments also buttress such reasoning by advocating the element of competition in the international system that operates on the assumption of anarchy in pursuit of power and security by the individual states (Waltz, 1979). Adoption of technology in general, including AWS, can be rationalised by the desire for relative advantage. Technological determinism sustains the above arguments by indicating the inevitability of adopting the technological advancements when such technologies become available. In such a case, AWS will not remain optional but will become a permanent aspect of warfare, driven by the interaction of structural and strategic factors. Ethical concerns are

important but do not stop the adoption process; instead, the concerns affect the way innovations are adopted.

The history of innovations within the military indicates that ethical questions have always been present along with technological developments, whereas application in warfare is still the inevitable result of all. AWS also follow a similar pattern, which includes initial rejection, then a steady adaptation, and an eventual normalisation of the use of AWS within military operations. The use of AWS offers immense benefits, such as increased precision, quick response, and less threat of violence for humans. The benefits of AWS reinforce the principle of economy of force articulated by Carl von Clausewitz (1984). Therefore, the synthesis of the Just War philosophy, technological determinism, constructivism, and security-based rivalry indicates that AWS will not only endure but will also define the way wars are conducted. Ethics will not be a hindrance for the use of such technology but will develop further along with AWS, proving the main thesis of the paper that AWS represent an enduring feature of contemporary and future warfare. Hence, AWS have come to stay and transform war in contemporary times.

3.0 Moral Dilemmas and Ethical Critiques

Several ethical criticisms of AWS arise in relation to the consequences of entrusting lethal operations to advanced technologies supported by growing levels of autonomy. Criticisms are centered around issues of responsibility, absence of human judgement, dehumanisation and the risks of lowered threshold for the use of force. The criticisms are some examples of problems arising from the dilemmas about the employment of new military technologies relative to existing ethical standards which regulate warfare. Nonetheless, a discussion of ethical concerns needs to be placed in the context of evolution of the military over time. Worthy of note is the historical pattern of warfare which suggests that ethical concerns usually follow technological change, prompting adjustment rather than abandonment of governing frameworks. The next section of

the paper critically evaluates the key criticisms of AWS, considering both conceptual validity and theoretical perspectives.

3.1 Responsibility and Accountability Gaps

One of the ethical considerations that is associated with the application of AWS is the presence of responsibility and accountability gaps. The conventional theories of warfare operate under the assumption of the existence of a clear accountability chain in which the responsibility of the decision to apply violence lies with the commander or combatant. With AWS, whose function includes targeting and engaging the targets through autonomous capabilities, there have been ethical questions raised on the issue of attribution of legal and moral responsibilities (Crootof, 2016). Critiques questioned who bears the responsibility, whether the designers of the system, the commanders or the political leadership or the technological system. The concept of an accountability gap contradicts the principle of responsibility that is part of Just War Theory as the concept requires agents responsible for moral assessment. However, the concept is exaggerated because responsibility does not disappear but simply shifts. Such shifts are apparent in current legal proceedings concerning OpenAI, the firm that developed the chatbot ChatGPT[1]. The firm is currently embroiled in legal battle of wrongful death for ChatGPT's involvement in deadly incidents (Reuters, 2026; Al Jazeera, 2025). The example clearly indicates that there is absolutely no ambiguity with regard to responsibilities concerning acts performed by autonomous systems but rather responsibilities can be attributed to developers, corporate management and regulatory agencies. The law and military systems are already structured in such a way to handle complex hierarchies of command and technologically mediated actions, as is visible from the advanced weapon systems that preceded AWS. Within a constructivist framework, norms and institutions continue to change in

[1] A chatbot (ChatGPT) is a computer program that simulates conversation with human end users by use of text or voice interactions, typically using generative artificial intelligence to automate responses (IBM, 2021; Brandtzaeg & Følstad, 2017).

order to sustain accountability in different technological contexts. Technological determinism, on the other hand, implies that the institutional systems will continue to evolve to ensure the regulation of emerging technologies (Crootof, 2016; Horowitz, 2010; Solis, 2016; Wendt, 2016). Therefore, the critique of responsibility gaps does not negate the viability of AWS but underscores the need for refined frameworks capable of addressing shifted responsibility.

3.2 Absence of Human Judgement and Moral Responsibility

Another ethical issue stems from the belief that there is an absence of human judgment and responsibility in the working of the AWS system. Critics argue that by allowing algorithms to make life-or-death decisions, human intentionality is removed from moral consideration because human control plays a critical part in evaluating warfare ethics (Coeckelbergh, 2010; Sharkey, 2013; Sparrow, 2007). The concept of human control stresses the role of intentional reasoning in making decisions that affect life and death. Critics further argue that the use of AWS could lead to the bypassing of human reasoning and thus conflict with existing ethical considerations especially in unpredictable combat situations. Developments in artificial intelligence, sensor fusion, and data processing technology allow AWS to function with an efficiency and capability that surpass the effectiveness of humans in target discrimination and threat evaluation. In light of the Just War theory, the necessity of ethics does not depend on the presence of human judgment but rather on the upholding of distinctions and proportionality. Insofar as AWS have the ability to improve compliance with such ethics, the lack of human judgment in the systems is not a problem from a moral point of view. Additionally, through the lens of constructivist evolution, concepts of ethics adapt to include non-human decision-making systems as well.

3.3 Dehumanisation and Distancing from Violence

The introduction of AWS technology has similarly been linked to concerns about dehumanisation and greater alienation from violence.

Involving less direct human participation in lethal operations, AWS is seen as potentially depriving warfare of the moral significance in terms of force usage, making AWS a more abstract and alien technology. The concerns are reminiscent of similar arguments raised with regard to long-range weapons, air strikes, and remotely operated machines, where the lack of physical presence on the battlefield and psychological distancing have changed the understanding of warfare (Walzer, 1978). As the analysis demonstrates, however, distancing from violence is not a unique feature of AWS but one of the major trends in the history of warfare. The invention of gunpowder weapons, artillery and aircraft has distanced soldiers from the battlefield without removing the ethical obligations. In Just War theory, moral assessment is based on consequences and adherence to moral standards rather than distance from the battlefield. In some cases, distancing may facilitate careful consideration of options rather than impulsive actions and acts of revenge, which is why distancing is further encouraged by technological determinism and constructivism. Thus, allegations of dehumanisation are not an irrefutable argument against AWS, but instead, reflect broader transformations in the conduct of warfare.

3.4 Risks of Lowered Threshold for the Use of Force.

Another argument made against the development of AWS is the fact that autonomous weapons lower the threshold for the use of force. Lowering the risk for soldiers and improving effectiveness may lead to politicians and militaries being more willing to go into conflict situations. Not having to face any immediate risks from the perspective of the side using AWS is considered as a reason why restraints will be weakened, which might result in more frequent or prolonged conflicts (Sharkey, 2013; Sparrow, 2007). Even though such reasoning is worth considering, certain strategic factors make the argument harder to accept completely. Security dilemma shows that any attempt made by the state to improve military capacity creates reactions from other states and thus results in increased competition and deterrence (Jervis, 1978). In such a situation, restraints

are formed by a wider set of factors than just technological capacity. History has shown that advancements in destructive capability do not always result in increased usage of advanced weapons but rather serve as a means of further deterring usage and being cautious about the situation. Additionally, the usage of AWS would enable more accurate and limited uses of force, which is a key component of the concept of proportionality in Just War Theory. Increased accuracy of targeting, along with rapid data processing and analysis, enable selective uses of force, decreasing the chances of escalations. According to technological determinism, once the technology becomes available, the technology will be incorporated into the military by the strategic actors, and the process of normalisation of usage of AWS would follow because of the constructivist process.

In general, the issues relating to AWS and morality constitute some sort of patterns identified through the whole history of warfare, when new technologies trigger moral concerns before becoming adapted and normalised. Concerns such as responsibility, absence of human judgement, dehumanisation and the risks of lowered threshold for the use of force remain important elements in the framework of ethics. Nonetheless, the analysis made on the basis of Just War Theory, technological determinism, constructivism, and the security dilemma proves that the concerns do not refute the legitimacy and permanence of AWS. Moreover, AWS should be regarded not as the denial of ethics but as a shift in the forms of ethics implementation.

4.0 Strategic and Humanitarian Arguments In Support of AWS

Arguments in favour of AWS can be made through an overall reassessment of the role that technological innovations play in affecting the way armed conflicts take place and are regulated. In modern warfare, which is marked by the progress achieved in such areas as artificial intelligence, sensors, and automated decision-making, there has been a growing focus on the issues of precision, protection, and legal compliance. The factors could be evaluated not only strategically, but also

in terms of ethics and law, regarding the use of force. There is therefore the need to consider whether autonomous weapons would lead to less collateral damage, better protection for military forces, and higher compliance with the principles of international humanitarian law. Such arguments should be considered from the perspective of the long-term trends in the development of military technologies. The next section of the paper critically evaluates the strategic and humanitarian arguments in support of AWS.

4.1 Precision and Reduction of Collateral Damage

The key advantage of AWS lies in the possibility of better precision in the use of force. In the era of the fourth evolution of warfare, which is marked by the advent of AWS, the development of artificial intelligence, sensors, and data analytics provides the means for high accuracy in identifying and engaging targets. Such technology enables the possibility to match patterns, including movements, shapes, and behaviours, with preset targets and consequently avoid ambiguity on the battlefield. The concept of distinction is central to the theory of just war, implying the need to differentiate between combatants and civilians. AWS can assist to conduct complex computational analyses. The issue of collateral damage, often been raised with regard to AWS, must be re-evaluated. The precision of guided targeting based on the integration of real-time data and situational awareness is capable of providing the ability to target only the proper military targets without causing any accidental damage. With technological determinism, there is an additional impetus for the development of more accurate systems. Since capabilities keep improving, the institutions of the military sphere become increasingly incentivised to use the technologies that increase operational efficiency but minimise any potential accidents at the same time.

4.2 Force Protection and Reduction of Military Casualties

Another strategic advantage linked with AWS pertains to force protection and the avoidance of military casualties. Conventional warfare subjects

combatants to great risks in terms of bodily harm often resulting in high levels of injury and loss of life. With the employment of AWS through unmanned aerial vehicles and autonomous ground systems, the conduct of dangerous missions can be achieved without placing human lives at any risk. Such an employment follows the concept of economy of force articulated by Clausewitz (1984) where the combat power available is used as effectively as possible without any wastage of human effort. Consequently, AWS can undertake missions that are inherently dangerous for humans to conduct. In addition to the strategic perspective, the humanitarian dimension can also be considered. Warfare has always gone hand-in-hand with atrocities and excesses, including violent acts motivated by emotions, revenge, and lack of discipline. Unlike humans, AWS have certain limitations and lack emotions. Lacking anger, fear, and thirst for revenge makes AWS incapable of committing sexual or physical abuse and rape that have defined human warfare. The limitations make a strong case for using AWS to achieve a more disciplined use of force. The security dilemma concept reiterates the necessity of employing AWS. Therefore, given the anarchical nature of the international system (Herz, 1950), the protection of troops and maintenance of strategic balance make AWS investment a logical choice for countries threatened by the military capability of other states.

4.3 Improved Compliance with International Humanitarian Law

An additional reason why AWS could be a good choice is the ability to contribute to better compliance with international humanitarian law. Regulations of armed conflict include well-defined criteria of distinction, proportionality, and responsibility that assist to measure the legitimacy of military actions. If AWS system are employed in controlled ways, the weapons are likely to contribute to better compliance with the criteria because of the consistent decision-making processes. In relation to the criterion of proportionality, weighing military gains and losses regarding the risk of civilian casualties is important. Advanced computational abilities of AWS allow processing huge amounts of information in real

time, which helps analyse potential consequences of actions more thoroughly than a person is capable of. The issue of accountability, which is often brought up against the use of AWS, can be resolved through the existing legal frameworks. International humanitarian laws already contain provisions allowing responsibility to be assigned to both states and individuals (ICRC, 1949; ICRC, 1977; ILC, 2001; ICC, 1998). According to the well-established principles, a state is responsible for any violation associated with military action, whereas an individual, that is, a commander or his superior, may be liable for punishment for any illegal act performed. The use of AWS does not undermine the principles, responsibility is assured by the chains of command, the rules of engagement, and the design protocols of the system. Constructivism underscores the ability of international norms and institutions to change and evolve under the influence of technology. Legal and ethical frameworks are not fixed, the frameworks evolve and adjust to accommodate new types of warfare. Technological determinism implies that, with the development and incorporation of AWS into military activity, the system of regulations will also evolve.

4.4 Strategic Inevitability and the Persistence of AWS

The transition to the fourth evolution of warfare represents a trend in history where technology shapes the course of warfare in different domains. Each evolution has been faced with ethical concerns, but the technology has been adopted in due time. Security dilemma is an effective concept that explains why such a pattern exists. The concept refers to how measures taken by one state to improve security through technological progress result in similar actions by other states, which leads to adoption worldwide. An example is how more states are now adopting AWS (Human Rights Watch, 2020; Herz, 1950; Horowitz, 2010; Jervis, 1978; Walzer, 1978). Both technological determinism and constructivism further reinforce the notion that AWS are an inevitable part of modern warfare. The issues surrounding ethical considerations, although critical, do not hinder the integration process, but rather influence the terms on

which the technology is applied. The necessity for strategic advantages, the humanitarian implications of using the technology, and the development of regulatory measures underscore the relevance of AWS. Therefore, the challenge for African states is not whether AWS will emerge within future security environments, but how governance frameworks can shape adoption in ways consistent with humanitarian principles, state interest, regional stability, and accountable use of force.

In general, arguments concerning both strategy and humanity that can be applied to AWS are based on three interconnected pillars: increased precision, better force protection, and increased compliance with international legal standards. The pillars rely on the potential of autonomous systems to solve problems arising in connection with warfare, such as collateral damage, human vulnerability, and inconsistency in moral judgments. In any case, the course of military development shows that any technological advances, once developed, become an inseparable part of warfare itself. The convergence of such pillars reinforces the central argument that AWS represent an enduring feature of contemporary and future warfare. Consequently, AWS will remain a central feature of modern warfare, representing not merely a technological innovation but a transformative development in the ethics and practice of modern warfare.

5.0 Conclusion

The central question guiding the study is whether delegating lethal authority to AWS constitutes an ethical advancement or a departure from the ethical foundations of war. An analysis of the various perspectives has shown that there is a contradiction between humanitarian motivations and ideological revolution, and neither side of the debate provides a complete solution to the problem. Proponents of AWS support a consequentialist point of view based on minimising harm. Greater precision of strikes, protection of soldiers from the dangers of combat, and improved accuracy of target selection have been presented as signs of ethical development.

In light of such considerations, taking humans out of dangerous combat situations can help to control emotional reactions, minimise retaliatory measures, and prevent any harm caused by human mistakes. However, opposing perspectives on the matter place the dilemma in the context of core concerns of moral responsibility and accountability. The nature of warfare has traditionally involved human responsibility with regard to choices that involve killing. Entrusting such decisions to artificial intelligence leads to major worries about moral responsibility, loss of accountability, and loss of judgement as an aspect of ethical war-fighting. In other words, taking out the human element from the process of deciding to kill represents a significant shift in the moral foundations of warfare.

Historical analogy complicates both positions. Major transitions in military technology have repeatedly generated profound ethical concerns, particularly during the introduction of machine guns, aerial bombardment, and nuclear weapons. Each innovation initially appeared to threaten established moral constraints, yet each subsequently became embedded within strategic and legal frameworks governing warfare. Nuclear weapons, despite the unparalleled destructive capacity, ultimately became regulated rather than prohibited in practice, reflecting adaptation rather than absolute ethical rejection. Such patterns suggest continuity in the evolution of warfare, where moral disruption often precedes institutional accommodation.

Contemporary analysis indicates a similar trajectory. AWS extend a broader historical logic in which technological advancement progressively shifts decision-making away from individual combatants toward complex systems of coordination and control. While such a shift intensifies ethical uncertainty, historical precedent suggests persistence of integration rather than categorical rejection. Moral unease surrounding emerging technologies has consistently accompanied moments of transition, yet such unease has rarely prevented incorporation into operational doctrine. Weighing competing claims, a dual conclusion

emerges. On one level, AWS may be interpreted as offering elements of moral progress through potential reduction of direct human exposure to violence and improved precision in application of force. On another level, such systems introduce a structural challenge to established ethical foundations by weakening direct human responsibility in decisions of life and death. The resulting tension reflects not a clear rupture or unambiguous advancement, but a reconfiguration of moral responsibility within technologically mediated warfare.

The central argument advanced holds that AWS represent an enduring feature of contemporary and future warfare. Rather than constituting an exceptional departure, AWS align with a historical pattern in which new military technologies rouse ethical concerns prior to gradual incorporation into strategic practice. While concerns regarding accountability, moral responsibility, and ethical constraint remain significant, historical continuity suggests adaptation rather than absolute transformation of warfare's ethical foundations. The analytical approach formulated in the research thus underpins regulatory strategies that take into account realties of strategy alongside ethical considerations, and provides the foundation for policymaking in regional and state contexts in Africa.

6.0 Implications for Governance and Regulation

Good governance of AWS is dependent on the formulation of frameworks that ensure human accountability in the decision-making processes for employing lethal force. The regulatory framework ought to focus more on the maintenance of human presence in important aspects of targeting and engagement so that human accountability can be maintained in well-known chains of command. For African states, such measures could include regional guidelines on meaningful human control, common accountability standards, and coordinated oversight mechanisms.

Legal regimes governing armed conflict must be adapted to address the unique challenges posed by autonomous systems. Clarification of

responsibility across designers, commanders, and political authorities is essential in order to prevent diffusion of accountability and to maintain coherence within international humanitarian law.

Transparency and verification mechanisms should be strengthened to reduce risks associated with misuse, unintended escalation, and proliferation. Confidence-building measures, including information sharing and oversight arrangements, may contribute to stability in an environment characterised by rapid technological advancement.

Coordination on an international level is vital in order to prevent inconsistencies within the framework for regulating AWS. Differences in regulations in various countries can result in strategic inequalities and undermine existing norms, hence increasing the risk of unstable competition between countries with regard to the development and use of AWS. Regional organisations including ECOWAS and AU could facilitate mechanisms for creating harmonised policies and negotiating positions on AWS.

Lastly, governance systems must be flexible to accommodate changing technological capabilities. Rigid regulatory measures might fail in tackling future advancements, while flexible measures are better positioned to cope with the arising ethical issues.

7.0 Areas for Future Research

Future research should focus on the influence that major powers can play in the formation of regulatory norms in relation to AWS as well as effects on conflict dynamics such as escalation and deterrence. More emphasis needs to be placed on regions lacking the capability to develop technology. There is also a need for research on the adequacy of international humanitarian law and past reactions to previous military innovations.

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