

Imagine yourself living under the supervision of U.S. military forces; unmanned aircrafts that watch your every move. Your village attacked on a regular basis, leaving behind death and disabled bodies. That is the reality behind drone fighting. Mark Coeckelbergh, philosophy professor at the University of Twente addresses the ethics of drone fighting.

## The ethics of drone fighting

### Playing a video game

Since 2004, more than 3.100 people were killed in Pakistan by the use of drones. Most of them were innocent. Less than 2% of the victims are high-profile targets. According to Coeckelbergh, the main problem with drone fighting is the fact that it changes warfare entirely. The distance makes it easier to kill: only a simple press on the button is sufficient. "Can you still speak of war or is it a kind of murder then?", he wonders.

A lot of people see drone fighting as playing a video game, where the drone operator does not grasp that he is actually killing people. Coeckelbergh argues that this is not completely true. "It looks like that but that also holds true for pilots of bombing aircrafts. They do not see the victims they make either. Research suggests that people can judge a video game as not being real. With drones, it seems real enough since pilots think about what they have done afterwards and find it strange to go back home after work." He explains that this indicates that something psychologically has happened, made possible by the use of cameras. Often, drone operators have been monitoring their subject for months. Through better cameras, they see what life that person has and they make up a story around it. A subject becomes more human this way. He becomes a father, husband and neighbor. "The big distance makes killing easier but the moral distance is reduced by better cameras that make it possible to get a better image."



### Increased distance

Coeckelbergh says that military technologies and the history of fighting can be interpreted as a history of creating increasing distance. Where drones than not the logical next step? "In terms of distance, drones are the ultimate weapon. The next step in warfare will be weapons that fire from space. I think this will be used more and more. By creating distance, you protect yourself while making it easier to kill people."

### States part of the problem

The risk of an arms race is always present with the existence of drones. They are being used on a massive scale by the United States. Coeckelbergh believes it is important to keep thinking about what is a just war. "We should avoid using violence as much as possible. But I do not believe in a control approach: creating rules or laws like thou shall not kill. On the contrary, we should create conditions in which violence is less probable." He also thinks that big entities like states are part of the problem because they make wars possible at a large scale.

### Moral machines

When asked about the future of drone fighting, Coeckelbergh is cautious. "Security is very important. We should look out for new technologies. More parties will try to disrupt drone signals and the increasing use of internet makes abuse and cyber crime possible." He warns for the risk of hacking. Coeckelbergh also opposes to the idea of drones operating on their own. "There is a lot of international protest against this development. Some philosophers believe that morality can be build into drones. I think this is a dangerous thought and we should push for regulation against it. Morality does not work like that. In morality, there is doubt. It is more than just a consciousness, it is emotion and involvement. That is not possible for a machine. In any case, there should always be a human involved for the human judgment." ●

Coeckelbergh was one of the speakers on the second day of TILTING Perspectives 2013, a bi-annual international conference at Tilburg University organized by the Tilburg Institute for Law, Technology and Society (TILT). Around 35 scholars were present during his presentation on drones: *Too close to kill, too far to talk: interpretation and narrative in drone fighting and surveillance in public spaces.*