Chapter 7
The Case Against Weapons Research

John Forge
University of Sydney, Australia

ABSTRACT

Weapons research seeks to design new or improved weapons and their ancillary structures. This chapter argues that weapons research is both morally wrong and morally unjustified. This "case against weapons research" requires lengthy discussion and the argument given here is a summary of that discussion. The central claim is that the "standard justification" for all forms of weapons acquisition and deployment, which appeals to defense and deterrence, does not stand up for weapons research because the harms caused by the latter projects into the future in unknowable ways. Weapons research produces practical knowledge in the form of designs for the means to harm, and its practitioners cannot know how this knowledge will be used in the future.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most morally challenging, and most enduring, forms of technology is *military* technology, technology that is associated with the organised violence that has been in the stock-in-trade of armed forces since ancient times. Military technology covers a broad area, including some forms that are similar if not identical to civilian technologies, so-called dual use technologies (Forge 2010). However, there are other forms that are unmistakably military and these include all of those that enable weapons to be produced. My concern here is with the endeavour that leads to such technologies, what I call *weapons research*. The aim of weapons research is thus to produce the technology, or more directly the design, for a new or improved weapon, or for the ancillary structures, such as platforms, necessary for using a weapon (Forge 2012: 13-14). This topic has been almost entirely neglected by moral philosophers and others.[1] I suspect that this may be because it is thought to be subsumable under discussion about the morality of war, and that moral judgements about weapons research follow from moral judgements about war. I believe that this is wrong and that weapons research is a topic for discussion in its own right. Having said this, I do of course acknowledge that certain particular classes of weapons research, namely

those directed towards weapons of mass destruction, especially nuclear weapons, have been discussed at length, and judgements have been made about the morality of such research. My own interest in the topic stemmed from my work on the responsibility for the use of the atomic bombs on Japan, but it has since expanded to cover weapons research as a whole.[2]

My topic also clearly falls with the relatively new, or newly named, field of technoethics, as it is certainly a judgement in regard to the 'impact of ethics on technological advance'. Indeed, if we look back to one of the seminal works on technoethics by Mario Bunge, we find a clear statement to the effect that not all technology is good and he explicitly mentions military technology. Bunge writes: "Just think of thanatology or the technology of killing: the design of tactics and strategies of aggression, of weaponry" (Bunge 1977: 100). Moreover, Bunge makes it clear that those who design technologies must accept moral responsibility for the impacts of their work. I agree completely and entirely with these sentiments. I also note that Bunge, and following him Luppicini (see Luppicini 2008: 1-2), stress that technoethics is a highly inter-disciplinary field. This accords with my own experience in regard to the morality of weapons research.

The purpose of this paper is to set out an argument that aims to establish that weapons research is both morally wrong and not morally justified.[3] I have made this 'case against weapons research' on several occasions (Forge 2004, 2007a), but most fully in *Designed to Kill: The Case against Weapons Research* (Forge 2012) and *The Morality of Weapons Design and Development: Emerging Research and Opportunities* (Forge 2017b). This paper is a sketch of the argument and makes no claim to be anything more that an outline – it takes a whole book (or two) to fully present the case. One way to mount such a case is to begin by affirming some form of pacificism, and then maintain that if war is wrong, so is weapons research. But this is not a good option, even granted that we could come up with a coherent version of pacifism. If weapons research provided the means for robust defence, then this might keep the peace by deterring war. In general, it is hard to see why weapons *research* is wrong if fighting is wrong. A better option is to address what I believe to be assumption behind the assimilation of weapons research to questions about the morality of war, namely that war and all that is needed for fighting wars is justified by appeal to defence and deterrence. The only justified war, or just war, is war which resists aggression. Hence weapons research is justified for the purposes of defence, and, even better because it prevents war, for deterrence. I refer to this as the *standard justification* for war and for all forms of defence spending, weapons procurement, etc. (Forge 2017b: Chapter 1) However, I believe that while the standard justification can apply to certain wars, it does not serve to justify weapons research. The case against weapons research can be seen in this sense to be a argument against the standard justification. It is now even more important to reveal the standard justification for what it is, as something based both on confusions and conflations and something that serves as a smokescreen to hide the special interests that profit from weapons development (Forge 2017b *passim*). The new US President plans to sharply increase spending on 'defence' while cutting social security programmes and is urging others to do the same. This is completely and utterly the wrong thing to do.

As a final comment by way of introduction, I claim that weapons research is not something relatively new, something that came about when scientific theory was applied to weapons design. The best-known instance of the latter, indeed of any episode of weapons research, is the Manhattan Project. It is clear that the very idea of the atomic bomb, let alone its detailed design, could not have been thought up without the experimental discoveries in, and theories about, nuclear physics that became available in the 1930s. Science had been applied to weapons design a century earlier, but hardly at all before that. However, systematic research has informed weapons research since at least the fourth century BCE. I have in

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