The Ethics of Gun Ownership

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Presidential Address

The philosophical literature on gun ethics overwhelmingly focuses on questions of rights. Do we have a right to own guns? Do governments have a right to restrict the private ownership of guns? The majority of the papers in the current debate about gun ethics address these questions, but this paper will not be concerned with questions of rights, since this seems to have been settled, at least as a practical, legal matter in the United States. Right now, in most states, any adult citizen who is not a convicted felon can walk into a sporting goods store and walk out with a firearm, spending as little as a few hundred dollars and waiting about fifteen minutes for an electronic background check.[1] Nobody will ask why you want a gun, or whether you even know how to use it. In many states, a person can legally buy a used gun at a gun show for less money, and without needing to pass a background check. The legal right exists, and although some people like to paint a picture of imminent governmental gun-confiscation, the legal right to buy firearms is not going to change any time soon. So the question of this paper is, given this legal right, do I as an individual have a moral obligation to either own or refrain from owning a gun?

Gun ownership is an interesting moral question in part because there are seemingly good moral reasons to own a gun and good moral reasons not to. After a little scene-setting, I will review what I think are the morally relevant issues: the need to protect yourself from crime, the possibility of lethal accidents, and the increased risk of suicide. After examining each of these individually, I will look at how they should be weighed against each other. It is often not easy to do so, and the conclusions I reach are therefore provisional, but in the end, I will argue that

moral considerations point towards a duty to not own a gun, at least for most people.

NARROWING THE SCOPE

Before examining the moral aspects of gun ownership, I want to narrow the scope of the discussion a bit. I will restrict this paper to only those issues that would be of concern to a hypothetical person who was deciding whether or not to exercise their legal right to own a gun based solely on moral concerns. This means that I will not address the possibility of aesthetic enjoyment of guns, of the economics of being able to hunt for your own food, or of the pleasures of sport shooting. With no particular interest in, or aversion to guns, but with a strong desire to do the right thing, what should someone do?

Framing the question this way means that I am assuming that the person to whom this paper is addressed is not a deep pacifist—that is, he or she would not consider it morally wrong to use lethal force in defense of their own lives. There are, of course, many people who simply think that it is never moral to take another human life, regardless of threat. This paper is not arguing against this position, but it is pretty clear that such a person would not be contemplating gun ownership for the purposes of self-protection. Any persons seriously engaged with the moral question of whether they should exercise their legal right to own a gun for the sake of protection have already decided that at least under some circumstances taking a human life is morally acceptable.

I will also assume that anyone who decides to own a gun for strictly moral reasons will fully acknowledge and accept the responsibilities that come with gun ownership. For this reason, I will not include the possibility of gun theft in the possible reasons to not own a gun; we can assume that responsible owners will secure their guns in safes. A gun safe is not absolute protection against theft, but I think it is sufficient to remove theft from the moral equation.[2]

PROTECTION

The usual argument in favor of gun ownership often goes something like this: we all have a fundamental interest in self-preservation, which entails a right to self-defense, and this in turn entails the right to own the tools required for self-defense. In our world, these tools are guns, and so we have a right to own them.[3] But as mentioned above, this paper is not about whether we have a right to own a gun, but whether we have a moral obligation to do so. The argument that we have such an obligation closely mirrors the one about rights: we have a fundamental interest in, and hence obligation for, self-protection, there may come a time when lethal force is the only way to defend ourselves, and a gun is the best tool to do this this. If we were to find ourselves in a situation where we could not protect our lives due

to choices we previously made, then we could legitimately be said to have failed in our obligations to ourselves. If we extend this line of reasoning to encompass the protection of others, as well as ourselves, it is even easier to see where we could be said to have a moral obligation to own firearms.

As gun advocates are quick to say, it is better to have a gun and not need it than to need one and not have it. If there was nothing on the other side of the issue, we could stop here, without asking how likely it is to need to use a gun in self-defense. As long as it is possible to need one, we ought to own a gun. But, there are, of course, factors on the other side of the gun owning equation, which we will address shortly. In order to weigh the benefits of self-defense against the concerns on the other side, we must first ask what the odds are that the need for a gun will ever arise.

How likely is it that any given person will have the need to defend their lives with a gun? This is a very difficult question to answer. According to some interpretations of survey data, there are about 100,000 defensive gun uses in the United States every year (Cook et al.). This is survey data, so it is questionable from the start, but there are bigger problems. Even if we knew with confidence that there were 100,000 defensive gun acts, that there were 100,000 prevented crimes, how many of these non-existent crimes would have been life-threatening? How many times did gun ownership save lives? From the survey data alone, we simply do not know.

Ideally, we would want to know the homicide victim rate for gun owners versus non-gun owners, in a controlled study. We are not going to get that. But, we do have some much more limited studies, and they seem to point to the fact that guns do not, at least, prevent all crime (Hemenway). It surely happens—there are compelling stories of people who defend lives with their guns—but how much and how often serious crimes are prevented by gun ownership is unknown.

But, we must say something in order to proceed, so I will begin with the most extreme possible conclusions. Most surveys say that about 35 percent of United States households have a gun (Morin). There were about 15,000 murders in the United States in 2012. If owning a gun prevented murder 100% of the time, then that would mean that all those murders were of the 65% of Americans without access to guns, which in turn would mean that gun ownership prevented 8,000 murders. That is the top number, but surely gun ownership is not magic, and does not prevent every fatal crime. On the low end of the answer, we know from the FBI uniform Crime Reporting data that there were 461 justifiable homicides in 2013; justifiable homicide being the legal definition of a killing in self-defense. So, there were at least this many serious, legally life-threatening crimes prevented that year. But of course, not all defensive gun uses end in death, and not all defensive killings even reach the judicial system, so number of acts of self-defense must surely be higher than 461. So, the annual number of murders prevented by guns in the United States lies somewhere between the hundreds and thousands.

There are, of course, other crimes that gun ownership may prevent. I am going to set aside the entire category of assault, since while some would want to make the case that preventing assault warrants the use of lethal force, it is far from obvious. It is easier, I think, to argue that lethal force is appropriate in response to rape. Here, the numbers completely overwhelm the number of murders. In 2010, there were 80,000 rapes reported in the United States (and it is worth noting that this is a notoriously underreported crime). As with murders, it is extremely difficult to know how often rape is prevented by guns; there have been no studies that compare the rate of sexual assault of women who own guns versus those who do not. But, like murder, we can do the math, and peg the top possible number of prevented rapes at 43,000.

Protection against serious crime is the primary moral reason people give for why one should exercise their legal right to own a firearm. As we have seen, it is difficult to pin down just how much protection a gun confers, but it is surely some. I will have more to say about the lack of concrete data as we go on, but for now, let's turn to the considerations that would point a moral person towards not owning a gun.

ACCIDENTS

This section is about accident gun deaths, but I will not be talking about the kind of accident when guns go off unexpectedly, or where children get ahold of guns without supervision. These are real fears that any gun owner should have, but lethal accidents, at least, turn out to be pretty rare. The CDC puts the number of number of unintentional firearms deaths at 123 out of about 100 million people in 2012, which is more than 30 times lower than the number of homicides. The odds of accidental deaths should be even lower for our hypothetical gun-owner, who we are assuming takes seriously the responsibilities of gun ownership.

But, there is another category of accident that is much more of a concern—it is possible, if you have a gun for protection, that you will use it wrongly. One of the more unique aspects of gun use is that it cannot really be a half-measure. If you have a gun for self-defensive purposes, you may find yourself in a situation where you feel under threat and act, and end up taking someone's life who was not, in fact, a threat to you. If you are well-trained and disciplined (which we can assume), then you will probably not be legally culpable, but you still would have taken an innocent life. It is one thing—and not a small thing—to decide that you are willing to take the life of someone who is threatening you. It is another thing entirely to decide that you are willing to risk innocent lives to protect your own.

Imagine someone who is worried about injury in a car accident and in response to this fear she choose to drive a large, heavy, truck. If we set aside the economic and environmental aspects of the choice, this might seem like a morally unblameworthy decision; heavy trucks protect their occupants from accidents

better than lighter cars. But, the morality of the decision to drive a heavy truck would depend on whether the potential accident the person was worried about would be caused by themselves or by the driver of the other car. Clearly, even a good driver has a chance of causing an accident and their decision to protect herself with a heavy truck therefore means that they may take innocent lives—lives that would not be lost if they were driving a less-heavy vehicle. Even if our truck driver is a relatively better driver than average (and thus less likely to cause accidents than to be involved in an accident caused by the other driver) she is putting innocent people at risk by protecting herself from potential accidents. It is not obvious that she is morally warranted in her choice of transportation.

It is probably true that we are morally warranted in engaging in activities that are intended to protect ourselves, but have some small risk of endangering innocent people. But, certainly there must be a limit to how much of such risk we are allowed. How often does it happen that gun owners mistakenly kill someone who appears to be a threat but in reality is not? As will become a common theme here, we do not know. However, it surely happens, and a moral person who is contemplating gun ownership must acknowledge the possibility.

SUICIDE

Any serious discussion of the ethics of gun ownership must consider suicide. There are about 19,000 gun suicides per year in the United States, which is about half of all suicides in the country. The sheer number of suicides in the United States, and the number of them that involve guns, is striking. However, what is more striking is that suicide is largely ignored in the literature on gun ethics. By looking at a few examples of how philosophers ignore or sideline the issue of suicide, we can start to see why suicide really should matter.

Nicholas Dixon, in one of the few philosophical arguments in favor of banning handguns entirely, cites the danger of handguns being readily available, but does not mention suicide (Dixon). I am not sure why this is, but I suspect that it is a matter of not knowing exactly how to treat suicide philosophically. It might be that Dixon omitted suicide due to a common misconception, that what matters is the suicidal *intent*, and not the *instrument* of suicide. One could claim that while half of United States suicides are accomplished with guns, if the guns were not available, then the suicidal people would find another way. While this seems like it might be the case, it turns out that it is not. Suicide is often a very impulsive decision, and if it is not easy to accomplish, the impulse goes away. [4]

Nonetheless, philosophers continue to treat suicide as a purely rational exercise. For instance, Michael Huemer, in his defense of the right to own guns, says the following as a way of removing consideration of suicide from an analysis of the question of gun safety statistics:

> One cannot assume that individuals who decide to kill themselves have overall happy or pleasant lives; therefore, one should not assume that the prevention of suicide, through means other than improving would-be victims' level of happiness, increases utility, rather than decreasing it. For these reasons, the suicides should be omitted from the figures. (Huemer 311)

This sentiment is echoed by Todd Hughes and Lester Hunt. In an article arguing that everyone has a right to own a gun simply as an exercise of their individual liberty, the authors argue that suicide is a private matter, and that the state has no right to interfere:

> Importantly, the desire to commit suicide is deeply felt and as important to those who experience it as any desire they could have. Further, supposing that they have carefully considered their decision to die, it is literally true that death is now part of their conception of the good, inasmuch as they have decided that being dead is (for them) better than being alive (Hughes and Hunt 13).

Both of these articles treat suicide as the rational end-product of deliberation on the merits of life. Of course, for some people who desire to end their lives, this is close to the truth; specifically, physician-assisted suicides seem to fall into this category (the vast majority of philosophical work on suicides focuses on this topic). For gun suicides, it is decidedly not. Owning a gun is the significant risk factor in suicide—some studies put the risk of suicide for gun owners at over three times the rate for than non-gun owners (Studdert et al).[5] It is not something that can properly be ignored in considering the ethics of gun ownership.

WHAT ARE THE ODDS?

On the one side of our moral question is protection, and on the other is the possibility of suicide and accidental shootings. How should these issues be weighed? A crude way would be simply to ask which is more likely. At most, guns prevent 8,000 homicides per year, and guns are used in 18,000 suicides per year. If you were worried about a disease that killed 8,000 people per year, and there was a vaccine that offered some (but not total) protection, you would take the vaccine. Unless, that is, the vaccine had side effects that killed 18,000 people per year. Then, obviously, the answer is to risk the disease, and by analogy, to not own a gun.

But, of course, we are talking about averages across a large population and the calculation may not be as simple as the vaccine analogy makes it out to be. According to FBI statistics, more African Americans were killed in 2011 than were

white Americans, even while African Americans make up about 15% of the total population of the United States.[6] On the other hand, according to CDC data, Caucasian Americans are more than twice as likely to kill themselves than African-Americans.[7] Further, across all ethnicities in the United States, men are far more likely to kill themselves than women. A more nuanced conclusion would be that for white men, gun ownership is more likely to be lethal than it is to be life-saving. For non-white men, gun ownership for protection makes more sense.

For women, there is an entirely new angle on the issue. Since women are the most common victims of sexual assault, and women are far less likely than men to commit suicide, it seems easy to conclude that women have a clear interest in gun ownership. But it is not so easy, due to the disturbing fact that the vast majority of sexual violence is perpetrated by an intimate partner or family member (Planty et al.). This is likely what lies behind the equally disturbing fact that a woman who lives in a home with a gun is much more likely to be killed by her partner than if there was no gun in the home. For women who live alone, a gun seems to be a good idea, but it is not a universal equalizer.[8]

WHAT ABOUT THE VIRTUE OF AUTONOMY?

The line of reasoning taken in the previous section is very common in the literature on gun rights, but there is something unsettling about it. My analogy above, of a vaccine, entirely ignores the agency involved in killings—it treats suicides as something that happens to you, not something that you choose to do. This is surely mistaken. Agency is an important, maybe crucial part of moral thinking. Someone who takes the value of agency seriously could argue for the duty to own a gun on the grounds that we all have a duty to maintain our autonomy, and this requires that we be able to actively protect ourselves, and if it also entails that we have a handy means to commit suicide if we so choose. The risk of suicide, then, is not a downside to gun ownership, but just an aspect of autonomy.

There is something admirable about this, but I think that in practice, someone who adopts autonomy as a basic virtue must also acknowledge that a part of taking care of yourself is choosing which situations are best for you. For example, imagine someone who avoids commercial air travel on the basis that when he is a passenger in a plane, he has no control over his own safety. His well-being is in the hand of the pilots, air traffic controllers, mechanics, etc. Instead of flying long distances, he therefore drives, presumably after personally verifying the mechanical soundness of his car. But, this is surely irrational, even when based on the premise of autonomy. Driving is more dangerous than flying, even with an attentive driver. Taking care of yourself—if it is to be rational and not pathological—must mean putting yourself in the best possible situation, and sometimes that will be one where you are not driving.

While we may value autonomy, we must recognize that autonomy does not

mean complete self-sufficiency. I can decide, for my own benefit, that there are things I will not put under my own control, for the sake of my own well-being (for instance, I will never own a chain saw, even though it means that someone else has to cut my firewood). But, there is another side to autonomy issue: do I now have a right to interfere with choices that I will make later? Specifically, do I now have the right to prevent myself in the future from committing suicide? After all, any suicidal thoughts that I may have in the future will obviously be my own, and it would seem to be an affront to the virtue of self-reliance and self-control to arbitrarily prevent them from being exercised based on my desires now. In thinking about this, remember that we are not considering suicidal thoughts at the time we acquire a firearm. Instead, at the moment of contemplation, we are only thinking about protection. But, it is possible that later, we will develop suicidal thoughts. What does the virtue of autonomy require of us?

Imagine someone who recognizes that they have a drinking problem, and decides that it is time to quit. Valuing autonomy and self-reliance, she tries to do so without outside help, simply quitting cold turkey. Is it a betrayal of the virtue of self-reliance and autonomy if she removes all the alcohol from her home? On the one hand, I can imagine someone who does not pour out her many bottles of whiskey believing that drinking is a matter of will, and as such, it is utterly irrelevant whether there is alcohol readily available. Such a person would say the same of the possibility of suicide: if they do not want to kill themselves, then their desire will prevent them, not any environmental factor like easy access to a firearm. For many, this approach to quitting drinking will seem extreme, even for someone who values autonomy. But, even it is rational, I do not think the same lesson can be applied to suicide. After all, the alcoholic who quits is actively engaging in a project of denial; however, for most of us, suicide is not like this. For most of us, the possibility of desiring suicide is a potential desire that is at odds with our current desires, not an active one that we want to learn to deny. Maybe a better analogy would be someone who wants to prevent himself from calling his former spouse when drunk. Would it be an affront to his own autonomy for him to delete their ex's number from his phone before he starts drinking? I do not think so. It would be a recognition of the possibility of being in a different (and passing) state of mind, where autonomy would no longer be a virtue.

The question driving this section is whether I have a moral right to prevent my future suicide, and it lines up quite nicely with whether I have a moral right to prevent the suicide of anyone whose life I have an interest in. Any answer would have to respect the person's autonomy. (Schlimme suggests, in a paper on the phenomenology of suicide, that the feeling of self-determination is a major part of what a suicidal person values most at the moment of the act). However, even while respecting the self-determination of a suicidal person, we can also recognize that this person might be acting impulsively, and would therefore be grateful later for being prevented from committing suicide now. An attitude that recognizes this

would admit that we do not have a moral right to absolutely prevent suicides of loved ones, but that we do have a right to prevent them temporarily, to at least ensure that their attitudes are not passing.[9] To turn the question back to gun ownership, respecting my own autonomy, including my future autonomy, means that I have no moral right to absolutely prevent my future self from suicide, but I do have a right (and an interest) in making it harder. Not owning a gun is an obvious way to do that.

CONCLUSION: THE ETHICS OF GUN OWNERSHIP

For some people—white men, in particular—what I have said so far has a pretty clear conclusion: they are at higher risk of suicide than of murder, and so the moral choice is to not own a gun. For other groups, it is much less clear, since we simply do not know how often gun ownership prevents serious injury, or how often innocent people are killed by responsible gun owners. It is tempting to make assumptions about what the data could be, but I think this would be very dangerous. I think when we are making a decision—especially a potentially life-changing decision—we have to rely on what we actually know. In this case, that there are proven dangers to gun ownership, and there are real considerations of respect for innocent lives (including our own future lives) that should push us towards not owning a gun.

That said, on a public policy side, this paper strongly suggests that we ought to give more importance to gathering good data on the actual risks and benefits of gun ownership, so that more persons can make informed, rational decisions about whether or not exercising their legal right to own a gun would be moral .

NOTES

1. In all but six states and the District of Columbia, an adult non-felon can purchase a long gun (rifle or shotgun) without first obtaining a permit.
2. According to the Department of Justice, in 2010, about 145,000 guns were stolen in the United States (Langton).:
3. See, for example, Michael Huemer's "Is there a Right to Own a Gun?"
4. In interviews with suicide survivors, over 80% deliberated about the decision to kill themselves for less than one day before making the attempt; 24% reported deliberating about suicide for less than five minutes (Simon et al.)
5. Others put it at only twice the risk (Miller et al.).
6. U.S Census Bureau, 2020 data: https://data.census.gov/profile?q=United+States&g=010XX00US
7. http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/suicide/statistics/aag.html
8. Tedd C. Hughes and Lester H. Hunt argue that guns are the great equalizer between women and their potential assailants, but they do not address the statistics that suggest otherwise.
9. An argument for this is made by Victor Cosculluela in "The Ethics of Suicide

Prevention.

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