The Firearm and the "Culture of Death": Foundational Presuppositions and Fundamental Questions

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Catholics face a dilemma when it comes to confronting the realities of the American firearm debate. Many conservative Catholics have trumpeted the importance of firearm ownership rights. They have viewed gun ownership as an expression of their concern for life and community, arguing that self-defense is a basic right that promotes life, that small communities are formed at gun clubs, and that family values are taught through parents teaching children about responsible gun ownership. And yet, particularly in light of the growing number of brutal slayings and the glorification of gun violence in the popular culture, there is at best an uneasy fit between firearms and Catholic social thought. The Catholic Bishops have renewed their concern over the role of firearms in forming a “culture of death” in contemporary America.

What does a consistent understanding of the Culture of Life/Culture of Death distinction that John Paul II developed in *Evangelium Vitae* require of Catholics

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1 A sampling of the views of Catholics on firearms can be found on the “Mirror of Justice” blog. (Available at http://mirrorofjustice.blogs.com/mirrorofjustice/2012/12/catholics-and-gun-control.html) last checked 12/21/2012.

2 According to a study issued by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, gun violence is significantly higher in the United States than in other, similarly developed countries. It is most prevalent in urban areas. Of all of the homicides committed, 66.9% were committed by using a firearm. The majority of gun-related deaths are suicides. Available at http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/statistics/Homicide/Homicides_by_firearms.xls (Retrieved 12/21/2012.)

with respect to firearm access and ownership in contemporary America? This essay explores the question, "What is the relationship between Catholic moral and social thought and the right to “keep and bear”? It is particularly concerned with understanding the responsibilities that come with that right for those who choose to arm for recreation, protection, or to preserve liberty. These are pressing questions that are likely to grow in importance as firearms become even more readily available.\(^5\)

**FOUNDATIONAL PRESUPPOSITIONS**

Before turning to the firearm issues, it is important, particularly for those readers who are not familiar with Catholic social thought, that some fundamental presuppositions be described. The presuppositions reviewed here are the terms in which the Church, and particularly John Paul II, described the issue.

**THE CHURCH AND CULTURE**

The Pastoral Constitution of the Church, *Gaudium et Spes*,\(^6\) discusses the relationship between Catholic thought and culture. It is a surprisingly complex relationship. It begins with the affirmation of the centrality of the teaching authority of the Church (*magisterium*).

History itself speeds along on so rapid a course that an individual person can scarcely keep abreast of it. The destiny of the human community has become all of a piece, where once the various groups of men had a kind of private history of their own. Thus, the human race has passed from a rather static concept of reality to a more dynamic, evolutionary one. In consequence there has arisen a new

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\(^5\) One particularly disruptive development is the new 3D printing technology, which appears to make possible the manufacture of inexpensive firearms in the privacy of one’s home. One project, Defense Dist., describes its mission as changing, “the way we think about gun control” by giving every citizen “near instant access to a firearm through the internet.” These are downloaded files that “print” on low cost advanced 3D printers. Their “Plan” is available at http://defensedistributed.com/proofofgun-2/

series of problems, a series as numerous as can be, calling for efforts of analysis and synthesis.\textsuperscript{7}

The rapid change to which the document refers has accelerated greatly since 1965, the year that the Second Vatican Council issued it. Today, the accelerated pace of change brought on by technology, especially information and network technology, is massive.

The church firmly believes that ... in her most benign Lord and Master can be found the key, the focal point and the goal of man, as well as of all human history. The church also maintains that beneath all changes there are many realities which do not change and which have their ultimate foundation in Christ, Who is the same yesterday and today, yes and forever.\textsuperscript{8}

The unchanging and timeless truth of Christ is at the center of the Church and the teachings of the Church. It is timeless in the sense of being of fixed and permanent relevance and truth. It is a means by which human beings can negotiate the change that has become one of the most prominent features of contemporary American culture.

That Christ is at the center of the Church and the key to understanding that which is unchanging in the culture is affirmed in paragraph 22, which reads:

The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light. For Adam, the first man, was a figure of Him Who was to come, namely Christ the Lord. Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear. It is not surprising, then, that in Him all the aforementioned truths find their roots and attain their crown.\textsuperscript{9}

This intensely Christological passage means that the analysis of meaning of cultural forms cannot be achieved apart from the mystery of Divine love and the fulfillment of human existence in that mystery.

The Church acknowledges that its mission, to spread the Gospel, has been furthered by developments within the secular world. In paragraph 44, it states:

\textsuperscript{7} Id at paragraph 5.

\textsuperscript{8} Id at paragraph 10.

\textsuperscript{9} Id at paragraph 22.
Since the Church has a visible and social structure as a sign of her unity in Christ, she can and ought to be enriched by the development of human social life, not that there is any lack in the constitution given her by Christ, but that she can understand it more penetratingly, express it better, and adjust it more successfully to our times.\textsuperscript{10}

This passage means that the Church must be mindful of developments in the changing world in two ways: First, the changing world can cast new light on the mystery of Christ—we might, due to some development in the secular world, understand how God’s love is expressed in new ways. Second, the Church always speaks to the present. It must find the means to communicate a mystery that exceeds what can be communicated in language alone to the present time, which is characterized by widespread moral uncertainty.

\textbf{THE CULTURE OF DEATH AND THE CULTURE OF LIFE}

In paragraph 12 of the encyclical, \textit{Evangelium Vitae} (April 1995), Pope John Paul II wrote:

In fact, while the climate of widespread moral uncertainty can in some way be explained by the multiplicity and gravity of today's social problems, and these can sometimes mitigate the subjective responsibility of individuals, it is no less true that we are confronted by an even larger reality, which can be described as a veritable structure of sin. This reality is characterized by the emergence of a culture which denies solidarity and in many cases takes the form of a veritable 'culture of death'.... Looking at the situation from this point of view, it is possible to speak in a certain sense of a war of the powerful against the weak: a life which would require greater acceptance, love and care is considered useless, or held to be an intolerable burden, and is therefore rejected in one way or another. A person who, because of illness, handicap or, more simply, just by existing, compromises the well-being or life-style of those who are more favoured tends to be looked upon as an enemy to be resisted or eliminated. In this way a kind of 'conspiracy against life' is unleashed. This conspiracy involves not only individuals in their personal, family or group relationships, but goes far beyond, to the point of damaging and distorting, at the international level, relations between peoples and States.\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{10} Id at paragraph 44.

\textsuperscript{11} John Paul II, "\textit{Evangelium Vitae.}" Supra n. 4.
This encyclical uses the phrase "culture of death" twelve separate times, often in opposition to the "culture of life" that the Church promotes. A powerful element in the contemporary culture of endless change has been the lack of an analysis of purposes, ends, and moral goals. This is true, most profoundly, of the purposes, ends, and moral goals of human life.

The faithful are not immune from the persuasive power of the culture of death. In the encyclical, Veritatis Splendor, John Paul II taught that "the criteria employed by believers themselves in making judgments and decisions often appear extraneous or even contrary to those of the Gospel." Contemporary culture has powerful influences that blind us to the presence of the Divine mystery. The contemporary technology of marketing and advertising is particularly powerful in shaping the way human beings understand and value the material culture—the objects they own and use.

In light of all of this, Christians today find themselves living, as St. Augustine suggested, as “pilgrims” in a foreign land, making use of things in the material world for their Divine use, not for the value assigned to them by the dominant culture. As Kenneth Schmitz puts it,

What Christians must do is to search the ambiguity of the concrete conditions of modern life, and especially in its putative progressive technology, in order to sift out what is for man's genuine good and what is not.

Schmitz gave some help in thinking about how to live as pilgrims in this Fallen world. A lasting legacy of John Paul II’s thought is the claim that attention must be given to the concept of the human person that underlies our political and moral theories. That means, that when we evaluate different cultural forms, we must ask, “How does this stand in relationship to the mystery of the Divine”? which is the image of God (imagio dei). That is to say, when thinking about cultural forms, Christians should ask, how does this form stand in relationship to the mystery of Divine love? Does it make it easier to see the subtle presence of the Divine in the lived experiences of others? Or, does it cultivate a desire for self-assertion, distraction, and further reduction of the person? Is it “Other-regarding” or “self-involved”? Does it open our hearts to the injustices and suffering of others?


\[\text{\footnotesize 13 Id at paragraph 88.}\]

\[\text{\footnotesize 14 Kenneth Schmitz, \textit{At the Center of the Human Drama}, (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1993) p. 122.}\]
With these presuppositions in mind, I now turn to three fundamental questions that are freestanding, but interrelated. That is, each makes an independent inquiry about the nature of firearms and firearm rights, but they fit together as well. Also, I hope that they are self-contained, in the sense of being evidently true without reference to external materials.15

**The Question of Essence**

The first inquiry is directed toward the essence of the firearm. It is commonplace to claim that there is nothing intrinsic to firearms that threaten the moral good. That is to say, a gun is just a bit of technology like a can-opener or a toaster. It can be used for evil ends, surely, but it is in itself not intrinsically disordered. Gun owners are, in fact, mostly very decent and loving people who, at least sometimes, find their hobby of shooting to be a means for achieving good ends. We might call this the “moral use” position, since it asserts that the object itself is amoral and only its use needs to be considered.

A traditional way to approach the question of the “moral use” of an object of material culture is to begin by asking what its telos might be; that is to say, what is its purpose? This question is difficult to ask in contemporary secular culture, which tends to reject the very idea of comprehensive ends. That is, contemporary secular American culture tends to see objects as satisfying immediate desires or useful to accomplish immediate goals that we have for them. It is rare that inquiry is made into the nature of the thing itself: to ask what its purpose might be? What is it designed to do? And how is it designed to operate?

This type of inquiry is one that Catholics should find familiar, since it derives from the metaphysical thought of St. Thomas Aquinas.16 For him, a firearm has no metaphysical or theological telos, since to have a metaphysical purpose, a thing must exist and be understood independently from matter. Material objects of human creation are studied by the physical sciences, which consider those things that depend on matter and motion both for their being and for their being understood. A firearm would be such an object, since it is nothing more than a compilation of designated matter cleverly organized to achieve an end through the movement of matter. More precisely, a firearm is a weapon that is composed of matter in order to fire a projectile with explosive force at distance with accuracy. Variations of the

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15 I have tried to keep this essay lightly footnoted. The reasons for this are two-fold. First, the arguments should stand on what is commonly known in order to be persuasive. Data is too easily subject to manipulation and disagreement. Second, the details of policy arguments tend to look to effectiveness and efficiency as apodictic principles. Here, I am with John Paul II arguing that the dominant culture, the “culture of death”—is overly committed to those goals.

firearm give greater emphasis to different aspects of this basic definition. For example, a rifle shoots farther; different caliber weapons fire larger or smaller projectiles; and other variations correspond to differences in the circumstances under which the operation of the firearm might occur. For example, smaller weapons correspond to circumstances where ease of handling or concealment are valued. The nature of the firearm is understood from its form and function.

A firearm is, in its essence, a weapon. It is intrinsically violent since it is brought into existence in order to bring about the potential for a violent act. Violence here does not mean violence directed toward another person, but it refers to the nature of the firearm’s existence. It would not exist as a firearm if it did not have the potential for violence. It is intrinsic to a firearm that the will of the user will direct the projectile and impact a target. Explosive force is the means, and destructive impact on the target is the most likely result. It is designed as a weapon.

It is from this nature that the firing of a firearm is pleasurable. There is a satisfying feeling of the power one gains over the weapon and the target that the weapon encounters. This is a widely reported sensation, and one that users of firearms will readily recognize. The ability to produce the pleasurable sensation of shooting a firearm is intrinsic to it—it is the consequence of the weapon fulfilling its purpose.

What is the nature of the sensation thus produced? In the “Treatise on the Passions,” (II-I Q22-48) Aquinas discusses the nature of passions in relation to objects. Question 26-39 focus on “concupiscent” passions, which are lustful desires, and Questions 40-48 focus on “irascible” passions, which are of an indignant spirit. He relates these desires to objects. “Some objects are simply delight—or sorrow—inducing; these define simple desire. Some are arduous and difficult to come by or to get away from; these define spirited or fighting desire.”17 He describes eleven separate pairs of passion under the two powers.

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<tr>
<th>Concupiscent</th>
<th>Irascible</th>
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<td>Love and hate</td>
<td>Hope and despair</td>
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<td>Desire and aversion</td>
<td>Courage and fear</td>
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<tr>
<td>Joy and sadness</td>
<td>Anger</td>
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He carefully develops his account of the passions to show that sin is not simply a matter of being overwhelmed by desire, but a choosing of lower passions over higher ones. Sin, which Aquinas examines in Questions 71-86, is not simply an outcome of being passion-driven, but an act of will. The will chooses against reason for a changeable good, a lower good that is not the highest good, which is beatitude with God. The sinner is misled by self-love to believe that the lower good is the highest good.

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We might seek to understand the threat posed by firearms through this Thomistic account of the psychology of sin, but we must also be wary that contemporary psychology has explored the structure of desire in many ways that were unimaginable to Aquinas.

Consider this description of desire by a woman who found affinities with Nancy Lanza, the mother of the mass murderer of Newtown, Connecticut:

I fell in love with guns from the first shot. It’s hard to explain what it was that did it. The hard pop and cold ease in the aftermath—a sort of Zen-like calm that spreads through you after the high adrenaline burst of the shot. Or was it the fact that I was actually good at it, a fairly decent shot, and a dog-and-pony show for the shooting range that afternoon? Oh, look, a girl who can shoot. Or was it the power, the feeling that I was in control of something that could destroy more effectively than almost anything on the planet? That I, a historically scrawny, weak nerd who’d been the prey to all sorts of danger, could now be the danger.¹⁸

This passage, and there are many like it, suggests how a Thomistic account of the firearm might go. The object itself appears to produce a lower order concupiscent desire. It might also produce a countering aversion, but it does not, in itself, seek to promote the higher pleasures. In fact, it can become an instrument of sin, particularly when the user is incited by anger, an irascible desire. Anger has no limit, no off-setting counter desire. In a fury of anger, the will might choose self-love to express itself in violence. This is the danger posed to the shooter by the firearm. It contains the means for sin.

This is not to say that the firearm might not be used to accomplish other purposes. It might be used to create social order, or to protect, or to build a sense of responsibility in the user. These goals are always, however, secondary to the intent that the designer had in mind as the purpose of the weapon, and to be effectuated require that its violent purpose and the desires it produces be subordinated or redirected. Used in this manner, it provides an opportunity for the user to be habituated to draw from the higher passion for intellectual virtue. It is worth noting, however, that for this to take place, a supportive community is needed to teach and correct the gun owner, to help that person develop the habits of reason with respect to the gun. Aquinas believed that law can play a role in habituating a person in this way.

We might summarize by saying the firearm is, in itself, an object that poses a
danger to the person in isolation. It creates a lower desire, but this can be off-set by
aversion. But, in the context of anger, there is no off-setting desire. To avoid sinning,
the will must choose the desire for the intellectual virtues over the desire for self-
love. A strong community (and strong laws) assists the will of the gun owner to be
habituated to responsible and to virtuous gun ownership.

THE QUESTION FROM CULTURE

Another approach examines the cultural meaning of “firearm,” and evaluates
firearms as a form of material culture from the perspective of the Culture of
Life/Culture of Death. At the outset it should be noted that this approach is
hermeneutical, in the sense of being concerned about cultural meaning, more than
the social science methods. This section considers cultural meanings of firearms and
the significance of laws in shaping cultural meaning.

It is commonplace to claim that there are in effect two cultural meanings for
firearms. One is urban and the other rural. The urban culture views firearms with
suspicion and fear. Urbanites tend to see them as weapons that are used to commit
violent crimes. But, there is also a rural culture that sees in gun ownership the
means for forming communities at gun clubs and for teaching values like
responsibility to one’s children and loved ones. In rural culture, the gun is related to
the common goods of community and family.

The argument against this view begins with an inquiry into the moral
meaning of firearms in the mass culture. One need not have much exposure to mass
media to know that this is appalling. The pervasiveness of the glorification of gun
violence (here against persons) in contemporary American pop culture is evidenced
in every form of mass media, from “gangsta” hip-hop music to zombie movies to
comic books and to the ubiquitous shooter video games. The pervasiveness of gun
violence is not a new feature to the culture, but the availability and intrusiveness of
violent media has never been greater. This has been well-documented. It seems
impossible to believe sincerely that firearm violence is neither prevalent nor
glorified in popular culture, or that it does not tend to promote violent behavior.

Given the ubiquity of violence in the media and popular culture, any
responsible Catholic committed to the “Culture of Life” should inquire into the moral
meaning of supporting firearms rights. This inquiry should consider what a
responsible Catholic should think about firearms rights in the context of the culture
of death, as John Paul II described it in Evangelium Vitae. The passage quoted above
begins with this statement:

while the climate of widespread moral uncertainty can in some way
be explained by the multiplicity and gravity of today’s social
problems, and these can sometimes mitigate the subjective responsibility of individuals, it is no less true that we are confronted by an even larger reality, which can be described as a veritable structure of sin. This reality is characterized by the emergence of a culture which denies solidarity and in many cases takes the form of a veritable 'culture of death.'

Applied to the firearm issue, this passage recognizes the difference between the urban rural meanings of firearms. It explains that moving within these cultural settings can mitigate moral responsibility of individuals who, through ignorance or cultural blindness, might not give consideration to the complexity of the “larger reality.” But, this passage insists that for those who understand the diversity of cultural meanings, they may not be absolved of responsibility by retreating into closed-off groups. In solidarity with others—between the urbanites for whom firearms mean violent crimes and death and rural gun hobbyists who seek community and virtue in gun ownership—we must stand together and seek a common good that can confront structures of sin that have emerged in our popular culture. We must work together, all responsible citizens, to transform the popular culture where gun violence is idolized and celebrated.

The passage continues:

Looking at the situation from this point of view, it is possible to speak in a certain sense of a war of the powerful against the weak: a life which would require greater acceptance, love and care is considered useless, or held to be an intolerable burden, and is therefore rejected in one way or another. A person who, because of illness, handicap or, more simply, just by existing, compromises the well-being or life-style of those who are more favoured tends to be looked upon as an enemy to be resisted or eliminated.

This passage gives some guidance on how the conflicting communities ought to view one another in light of the need for solidarity. First, John Paul II calls attention to the “war of the powerful against the weak.” Understood in the context of the firearm debate, who is powerful and who is weak?

Clearly, there are weak and powerful on all sides in this debate. The NRA is a tremendously powerful lobby, backed by a multi-billion dollar industry. The mass media that creates and glorifies gun violence is also a multi-billion dollar industry. There are substantial gun control lobbies that are somewhat less well-funded, but they also have considerable political clout in some states. These parties are the

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19 Evangelium Vitae, para 12.

20 Id.
powerful. Their influence in the decisions of morally responsible persons should be carefully scrutinized. It is not that these groups cannot contribute to meaningful consideration of the issues, but their motivations, objectives, and purposes need to be considered at all times. In particular, arguments that entangle the gun ownership debate in arguments about efficiency, productivity, and economic gain should be viewed with suspicion. It seems clear that many of the most powerful players in these institutions reap huge benefits by perpetuating gun violence and the popular culture that celebrates it. This is an aspect of the “war of the powerful against the weak.”

The question that responsible urban Catholics and rural Catholics must consider is how they can work together to think clearly about the policies that will lead to greater acceptance, love, and care among all American citizens? Which path will most effectively combat the “Culture of Death” that has been created in popular culture and mass media? Working this out requires a sincere interest in promoting the culture of life, a culture in which the mystery of the Divine in each and every person is valued—even the criminal. This was affirmed by the US Catholic Bishops in a 1995 pastoral letter:

This growing culture of violence reflected in some aspects of our public life and entertainment media must be confronted. But it is not just our policies and programming that must change; it is our hearts. We must condemn not only the killing, but also the abuse in our homes, the anger in our hearts and the glorification of violence in movies and music. It is time, in the words of Deuteronomy (30:19), to "Choose life so that you and your descendants may live ..." We must join with Pope John Paul II to "proclaim, with all the conviction of my faith in Christ and with an awareness of my mission, that violence is evil, that violence is unacceptable as a solution to problems, that violence is unworthy. Violence is a lie, for it goes against the truth of our faith, the truth of our humanity."21

The argument advanced by urban culture, which argues that the abundant presence of guns in the community is destructive to the social fabric, is fairly straightforward. In some urban areas, guns (legal and illegal) are widely available. The argument proceeds as with the argument against decriminalizing illegal drugs: liberal gun ownership laws create a culture in which the prevalent gun violence of popular culture is given an imprimatur of legitimacy by the normative significance of being “legal.” Catholics involved in the pro-life movement are well-familiar with this argument. Just as legalized abortion leads to an imprimatur of the acceptance of killing the unborn, legalizing ownership of guns will be understood as lending legitimacy to the culture of gun violence, given the already present wide-acceptance of gun violence in the popular culture. The culture of death is supported by liberal

21 US Catholic Bishops, “Confronting a Culture of Violence,” supra n. 3.
gun ownership policies if the culture is indifferent to the poor urban youth who die meaningless and brutal deaths every day. They too are “the weak” with whom we must stand in solidarity. Supporting national gun policies will demonstrate concern for those who are weak, in the sense that they fall victim to the seduction of gun violence.

**TWO QUESTIONS OF FREEDOM**

Advocates of firearms make two related claims about the significance of firearms in respect to freedom. One argument centers on the individual, where it is contended that personal safety (and therefore autonomy) is extended by gun ownership, particularly where the weapon is either in the home or carried in public. The second argument claims that gun ownership is necessary in order to constrain the state from taking the rights of individuals.

John Paul II’s thought is helpful here as well. A legacy of his thought is the call to pay attention to the conception of the person that supports the conception of freedom. More precisely, he argued that the conception of freedom toward which a political regime is directed must pay due regard to the dignity of the person, which is evident in the presence of the mystery of the Divine, which for him is the image of God (*imagio dei*). A political theory that does not respect the mystery of the Divine as it is present in each person will ultimately prove to be tyrannical, not liberating. This was the argument that John Paul II used with success against the Soviet Union. The freedoms sought by a political regime must be correlated to a rich understanding of the moral nature of the person. John Paul II consistently argued that the person is not reducible to a system of rational principles or to a set of stated experiences. The mystery of each person exceeds what the human mind can fully grasp because each person bears the image of God.

While there are no doubt many affinities between classical liberalism and Catholic thought, it would be a mistake to view John Paul II as wholly endorsing liberal political theory. The differences matter here. While clearly he did endorse many of the same rights endorsed by John Locke and J. S. Mill, he did not accept the empiricists’ anthropology of either philosopher, both of whom viewed the person as essentially a scraped tablet (*tabula rosa*) or blank sheet upon which the experiences of the person are written. The thickly nuanced view of the person that Catholics have developed over the centuries is in many respects incompatible with the liberal view.

This matters for understanding the differences between the liberal conception of freedom and the conception that John Paul II developed. For him, persons are never entirely free unless their freedom is directed toward the moral good. That is, unless persons are nurtured to enrich their relationship to the mystery of the Divine, they are not free. Service to others, moral responsibility,
prayer, liturgy, ritual practices, art, music, and literature, all play roles in forming the person for genuine freedom.

John Paul II’s concern with “moral anthropology,” or the meaning of the person as a moral entity, is applicable to the firearms issue, since firearms rights supporters typically look to the protection of personal and political freedom to justify gun ownership. It is incumbent on persons arguing in this way to consider the nature of the freedom being protected. Is it consistent with a rich conception of the person that does justice to the intrinsic dignity of the person?

SELF-DEFENSE, AN OPEN QUESTION

The Second Amendment guarantees the right to a “well regulated militia.” In the landmark case, District of Columbus v. Heller, 554 US 570 (2010), the United States Supreme Court affirmed that it protects an individual’s right to possess a firearm for “traditionally lawful purposes,” such as self-defense within the home. The argument from “personal safety” typically goes like this: increased access to firearms allows persons to protect themselves and their families. This is, of course, a basic right recognized by natural law thinkers from Constantine to today. Thomas Aquinas recognized this natural law principle in the Summa Theologica (II-II, Q64, A7). He argues for the “principle of double effect”:

Nothing hinders one act from having two effects, only one of which is intended, while the other is beside the intention. Now moral acts take their species according to what is intended, and not according to what is beside the intention, since this is accidental and is explained above (II-II Q43, A3; I-II Q. 72, A1)

One might act with the purpose of saving a life, but that act might have two effects, the saving of one life at the cost of another. Since the intention (aim) is to save life, there is no moral culpability in the act of taking another. “Accordingly, the act of self-defense may have two effects, one is the saving of one’s life, the other is the slaying of the aggressor.” The reason for this is that the intention to save a life is rooted in a respect for the dignity of life. Catholics have looked to this argument for many centuries to justify many acts that lead to unintended death and suffering.

The right to self-defense must be carefully tailored, however. The Church has cautioned that the principle of double effect applies only if four conditions are met (1) that the act intended must be good; (2) the only thing that is intended is the good; (3) the good does not arise from the evil effect, in the sense of growing out of it (this has meant in self-defense cases that the use of deadly force should be the last resort); and (4) that the evil effect is not disproportionate to the good sought. These conditions seek to limit the right to self-defense since it can easily turn from the amelioration of an evil based on tragic necessity into a perceived affirmative good. If the intention shifts, even momentarily, to the aim of taking life, of vengeance, or
anger, or the desire to feel powerful, then the principle of double effect does not apply. Human desire for domination remains a powerful influence and constant danger in moral conflicts.

And there is another danger, which is ideological fixation. This is a form of the desire for dominion that is particularly prevalent in our times. This danger is two fold. It is a desire for dominion over others through ideas, and a desire for a dominion over ideas themselves. Achieving dominion over others by controlling what is viewed as acceptable discourse, rather than the threat of physical force, can be no less corrupting to the soul. Ideology that leads to blinding the society to relevant changes in the context of moral action is particularly dangerous. John Paul II points this out by drawing attention to the changed circumstances in which the death penalty is applied. This point was affirmed by the US Catholic Bishops in a pastoral letter issued in 2005 titled “A Culture of Life and the Death Penalty,” which reaffirmed that “the Death penalty is unnecessary and unjustified in our time and circumstances.”

We must consider what it means to justify firearms policy by looking to self-defense against this background. Let us begin by considering the central point made by Aquinas: Being rightly motivated when one acts in self-defense is fundamental to ameliorating moral culpability. The purpose must only be to save life. Policy makers must consider a number of issues: Can pure motives be the case for the gun owner who buys a weapon in advance, sometimes years in advance, of its actual use? Will the use of deadly force for such a person be the last resort? Will the use of deadly force be proportionate to the threat? Will the policies promote cultural attitudes that are conducive to a greater appreciation of the value of human life? These questions, which focus on the moral good of the shooter, are rarely considered in modern policy debates, but given the gravity of the sin, a law that does not consider the moral status of the shooter would be unjust.

A typical response to mass shootings has been a call for more firearms. For example, after the Newtown School shooting, several commentators and policymakers suggested that elementary schools should be protected by an armed staff-member. While these proposals have some appeal to the extent that they promise safer schools, even if the empirical data suggests that arming some teachers or administrators would improve the security of some schools, the inquiry cannot end there. What values are taught? What virtues are pursued and extolled by turning elementary schools into armed camps? For example, will the children learn to love their enemy? These questions suggest that much more study needs to be done on the moral meaning of the self-defense claim. A nuanced approach would

consider how gun ownership policy relates not only to personal safety, but also to the moral well-being of our society. It would be an analysis that would draw on the moral meaning of the firearm in its essence and in the cultural milieu.

**Firearms and The Liberalism of Fear**

The Second Amendment itself roots the right to “keep and bear arms” in the necessity of a well regulated militia for securing “a free State.” The relationship between the militia and the freedom of the people was explained perhaps most succinctly by Thomas Jefferson’s oft-quoted quip that “The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants.” While there are several versions of it, the belief that patriots can and should rise up against government in the face of tyranny, was a foundational one for the Revolutionary period and it is an essential part of the classical liberal tradition.

The moral anthropology of the classical liberal tradition, although compatible with Catholic beliefs regarding the nature of person, is not completely aligned with every version of it. Given the admonishment of John Paul II regarding the significance of moral anthropology for political thought, we should closely consider the alternatives.

One approach which fits the Second Amendment language, but not Catholic moral anthropology, was developed by Judith Shklar, an influential political theorist of the end of the last century. Shklar developed a view that she called the “Liberalism of Fear.” According to her, the state should be organized to protect the individual from cruelty. In her words,

> The first right is to be protected against the fear of cruelty. People have rights as shields against this greatest of human vices. This is the evil, the threat to avoid at all costs. Justice itself is only a web of legal arrangements required to keep cruelty in check.23

A cruel society is one in which freedom is impossible for the victims and the tyrants. The impotent have only those freedoms that the tyrants permit, and the tyrants are enslaved to insecurity over their position. The system is stable, but like a mound of glacial ice, it is frozen. Shklar argues that liberalism risks instability to achieve greater individual freedom. The liberal ethos values freedom over stability. Stability and freedom are negatively related: instability is a necessary condition for freedom, and freedom creates greater instability. Her view of liberalism suggests no end nor purpose for the liberal State other than to enable persons to make a maximal number of effective decisions. There is no higher end, no purpose, no good to which the liberal State might strive.

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The right to keep and bear arms in such a State guarantees the individual citizens a means to resist the State if it becomes excessively tyrannical or the conditions in the State become threatening. Cruelty must be held at bay, even at the cost of social disorder. This, for Shklar, is the meaning of liberty. It is the absence of the cruelty of the State, the ability of persons to seek their own way in the world, free from coercion.

John Paul II cautioned against this view of freedom. Although classical liberalism has its origins in Christian thought. But by twists and turns the harmonies of faith and natural reason worked out in Christian political thought were altered. This is particularly evident in the modern conceptions of the person that support our contemporary political and economic systems. The liberal tradition from the Enlightenment forward founded its politics on extremely reductive accounts of the person, which reject questioning the purposes of human life and the proper uses of the goods of material culture. This was true of the radical empiricist views of the person developed by Locke and Mill, and of the equally radical rationalist view of Kant. In different ways, both of these orientations to the person denied the value of the lived experience of the mystery of the Divine, which is experienced by embodied creatures in ways that exceed conceptualization and extend human reason in faith. John Paul II stated, in a speech in Lublin,

The reduction inherent in the Enlightenment view of man, of “man in the world”, to the dimensions of an absolute immanence of man in relation to the world, ushers in not only Nietzsche’s issue of the death of God, but the prospect of the death of man who is such a materialistic vision of reality does not in the final eschatological sense have any possibilities other than those of the visible order.24

In contemporary American consumerist culture, choice is equated with unimpeded freedom to choose among material goods. This is a powerful distortion of the Christian worldview.

This freedom to choose extends to the presumption that, given the experience of rapid change, there is no fixed human nature, that it is entirely up to each individual to choose the moral meaning of his and her own existence. In its most extreme forms, the existence of human nature (and any social nature) is denied. The deep entanglement of this view of self-creation with American legal thought was captured with some force by Justice Kennedy’s so-called “mystery clause” in Planned Parenthood v. Casey, 505 US 833 (1992).

One of the insights from his earliest work is that freedom is not an arbitrary movement or impulse. In The Acting Person he wrote, “Freedom is expressed by efficacy, and efficacy leads to responsibility.”25 Kenneth Schmitz explains “Through our human acts (actus humanus) we effect ourselves and other persons and things; and in this efficacy lies the root of our responsibility.”26 For Wojtyla, the person experiences moral meaning by acting responsibly. It is that moment when one chooses to act responsibly that freedom is present. In this way, freedom is indexed to human nature, such that no person can be genuinely free unless he or she is free to pursue the Good through responsible action.

Shklar’s view of liberty is incomplete on this account since it denies the possibility of a comprehensive (metaphysical and theological) conception of human nature. Absent such a conception, there is no possibility of an ultimate transcendent good by which the uses of license can be measured. Jaroslaw Kupczak explains John Paul II’s view of this critical point.

Freedom of choice forms the core of Western liberal culture. By presenting in The Acting Person his own theory of freedom, Wojtyla began his profound dialogue with liberalism, which has continued throughout his whole pontificate. While emphasizing the essential link between freedom and truth he points to the limitations of freedom. He also warns that if these limitations are crossed, human liberty can easily and destructively turn against itself.27

Shklar’s view of liberalism is fundamentally incompatible with John Paul II’s. Her view of the human person is non-teleological in the sense that she does not view persons as having a comprehensive purposive. Thus, freedom can have no transcendent dimension. It is simply a matter of the will choosing whatever desire it finds satisfying for the moment. The careful distinction that Aquinas made (discussed above) between lowly desires and their rational control are not a part of her understanding of the person. Freedom to be irrational, to be guided by concupiscence and irascible desires, are legitimate goals for liberalism. The need for the will to cultivate reason and moderation also are not part of her understanding of human freedom.

Applied to the firearms question, the question of freedom suggests that it cannot be a freedom without purpose, without responsibility to the Good (as Shklar conceived it). The freedom protected by the right to keep and bear arms, if it is only the freedom to pursue self-love, is not a genuine freedom. Law has a role to play in

26 Schmitz, Supra n. 14 at 83.
creating a society that habituates persons to reason and prudence with regard to firearms as well as alcohol, narcotics, or any other potentially self-destructive material being.

**CONCLUSION**

From this discussion, some tentative conclusions might be drawn. A foundational claim for a Catholic approach to firearms would be that reasonable regulation of firearm possession and use must be a part of any decent legal system, since firearms are potentially destructive not only for the victims of firearm violence, but also for persons who use them and for the culture in which they are present. The good of the victim of gun violence, the gun owner, and the society as a whole must be considered in determining morally appropriate firearm policies.

From this analysis of these fundamental questions, we can reach some tentative conclusions about how a debate on firearms might proceed.

1. The problem of gun violence is part of the culture of death. It is part of a culture that does not demonstrate appropriate respect for the value of the mystery of God in each and every person. Firearms regulation must be considered in the context of other efforts to reform the culture of death. Changes to law, media, etc. are all part of this effort.

2. Since the freedom sought by the right to keep and bear arms is not related to a comprehensive vision of the common good, it comes with it a heavy moral responsibility to protect innocent life; not only do persons need protection from gun violence, but also the lives of the weak, the undesired, and those whose lives are unwelcome need protection in contemporary culture. Gun ownership advocates have a special responsibility to take care in evaluating the impact that arguments for gun ownership rights might have on the larger culture. Arguments that discount the importance of suicide victims, for example, further the culture of death.

3. Self-defense and the defense of neighbors through the use of deadly force is a grave undertaking. To adopt this understanding of gun ownership requires rigorous preparation, not only in the effective use of the weapon, but spiritual preparation as well. Catholics who would arm for self-defense should also be prayerful of the need to avoid taking life. Frequent confession and rigorous devotion to spiritual practices that purify one of the desire for violence and self-love are necessary to be morally prepared to take a life in defense of oneself or another. The cultural impact of any policy that increases the use and open display of firearms must be carefully considered. What impact will it have on the cultural meaning and value placed on human life?
4. Where gun ownership is used to develop family and communal values, spiritual practices and prayer are also needed. Training a young person to be responsible in using a gun at a target range might include, for example, praying with the child that the gun might never be used in anger or to take a life.

5. Given the centrality of guns in contemporary American culture, gun owners have a heightened social obligation and opportunity to advocate for life. Voluntarily taking on the responsibilities associated with gun ownership, they should work to protect all life from violence through public debate and activism aimed at increasing the understanding and awareness of the intrinsic value of human life. This includes taking pro-life positions on abortion, euthanasia, and the death penalty.

These points are meant to stimulate discussion. This is not the conclusive or final word on the subject, but this does follow from the analysis that I have developed in this essay. Catholics can and should bring their beliefs to public discourse on this important subject.