Gun Control in the United States: Ethical Perspectives for the Twenty-First Century

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The current author will explore the way we should think about the ethical implications of gun control in the United States today. The generating pedagogy will be: (1) an explication of worldview perspectives, personal and community as per the author’s recently published writings; (2) a discussion of the worldviews of both sides of the gun control debate; (3) a critical appraisal of the positions of each side; and (4) some suggestions about a future that is without ordinary citizen ownership of guns. The author argues that based on an ethical rights model of analysis, an ordinary citizen’s right to bear arms is outweighed by other competing rights claims.

Each day, the emergency room in countless hospitals across the country is beset by young men and women who are admitted with severe gunshot wounds that require surgical care. Why is it that some of our major cities have as many as one shooting (on average) each day? How can we make sense of this steady stream of carnage? What should be done about it?

The Phenomena

Each year there are more than 28,000 fatal gunshot victims in the United States.10 The causes for this phenomenon are very complex and defy full exposition in this essay. One set of causes is social or political in origin. These factors revolve around the agents themselves and why they decide to carry guns. These causes will be addressed later.

Another important concept focuses on the weapon. What makes one weapon preferable to another and what does it mean to carry one sort of weapon as opposed to another? One way to understand this important concept is the notion of a weapon’s damage coefficient.
For the purposes of this essay, a damage coefficient may be assigned to a weapon in proportion to the following factors: (1) the normal extent of damage that can be expected to be caused by a weapon in its most efficient application (on a scale of 0–10); and (2) the probability that the most efficient application will take place (on a scale of 0–1). To arrive at a weapon’s damage coefficient, both factors are multiplied. For example, there are two weapons, A and B. Weapon A normally could kill in an efficient application (10) but it rarely would happen (.1). The damage coefficient for Weapon A would be 1.

In contrast, Weapon B normally only could bloody your nose (2) and it almost always happens (1). The damage coefficient for Weapon B is 2. Therefore, on this account, the damage coefficient of Weapon B is greater than Weapon A.

The damage coefficient is an important concept in evaluating weapons because it allows us to balance the normal potential for the weapon against that potential’s probability of occurring. It is the contention of the current author that a weapon that possesses a higher damage coefficient is more dangerous in practice. The damage coefficient weighs practice over potentiality. This especially is useful when one thinks in group dynamics, but it does not reveal the entire story. A lethal weapon (such as an eighteenth century dueling pistol) may have a very low effectiveness and therefore a low damage coefficient, but it still may cause fear and threaten another for its potentiality, what it might do. This potentiality creates a palpable effect that should not be ignored. As much as possible, the current author will try to keep both sorts of concerns in mind as weapons are evaluated.

When modern weapons are considered, it is clear that the gun is a unique weapon. To understand its uniqueness, one must imagine the world before there were guns. In this world, the most common weapon in domestic situations probably was the knife, fist, or physical contact with a blunt object, which might include extensions of the fist such as an implement of pottery. Therefore, if Person A got mad at Person B and wanted to do violence to him or her because of anger, the most common weapon (unless he or she were in the kitchen) would be the fist or some common implement that was at hand such as a plate or vase. Now these latter implements can be lethal in their own way, especially if the blow is delivered in an especially sensitive spot on the head, spine, or some other area of vulnerability. However, these weapons have a much lower damage coefficient than does a modern pistol or rifle. This is because when one uses a firearm as a weapon, the probability of severe bodily harm or death approaches 1.0 whereas earlier weapons (including knives) had a much lower probability. This lower probability largely is attributable to the weapon having a lower inherent danger. To kill with one’s fists, a flowerpot, or even a knife, some skill is involved on the attacker’s part.

The victim of the attack also has more opportunity to avoid bodily harm—especially if she or he is a skillful fighter.

These dynamics do not exist with the modern gun. The accuracy and ease of operation make the gun an equalizer. Small and weak people can kill as effectively as savvy street fighters. This fact makes the gun the weapon of choice for all those seeking an offensive and defensive weapon. The amount of damage that normal bullets create (not to mention the increased amount of damage that split or exploding bullets wreak) makes the modern gun clearly the most efficient device for tearing, shattering, and destroying human tissue, bone, and vital organs. This conjecture is borne out by the statistics. In 1999, the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation listed 12,658 murder victims. Of these victims, 8259 were killed by firearms. The next most lethal weapon was the knife (1667 victims). The third most lethal weapon was some sort of blunt instrument (736 victims). Therefore, for the purposes of this essay, it will be assumed that guns (including rifles) have the highest damage coefficient of any common individual weapon.

Personal and Community Worldview
How should people and communities confront the phenomena of modern guns and rifles?
One way to approach this question is through the concept of worldview. An individual’s worldview is an examined depiction of facts and values that the agent holds to be true. The Personal Worldview Imperative is a normative command that everyone must undergo regular self-examination of his or her worldview according to the highest standards, “All people must develop a single comprehensive and internally coherent worldview that is good and that we strive to act out in our daily lives.” The three principal conditions that are set on a worldview are that it be comprehensive, coherent, and good. From the outset these conditions infuse an ethical viewpoint into everyone’s daily life.

There are two conditions that attach themselves to the exposition of a personal worldview: sincerity and authenticity. The Personal Worldview Imperative dictates a self-examination by an authentic, sincere agent. This presupposes that agents possess the capacity of reflection and choice. If the agent reflects according to his or her highest abilities and is motivated to seek the truth, then the agent can be termed sincere.

If the agent strives according to the structures in the Personal Worldview Imperative (including all of his or her values, not merely ethical values) and is willing regularly to review his or her worldview according to the dialectical process advocated by the imperative, then the agent can be said to be authentic. Therefore, sincerity is about intent whereas authenticity is about intent within a proper structure. Neither sincerity nor authenticity is sufficient to produce a worldview that is coherent, complete, and good. More may be required beyond the agent’s ability. However, this is the proper goal for each of us.

Why be a sincere and authentic agent? The reason that it is good to be a sincere and authentic agent is that only sincere and authentic individuals fully actualize what it means to be an agent in the world. This is because only the sincere and authentic agent truly is autonomous, a self-law-maker. Other pretenders to autonomy who espouse might makes right theories, such as Plato’s Thrasymachus, fall prey to logical contradiction. Only a truly autonomous agent can said to be fully responsible (positively and negatively) for what he or she does. Human nature dictates that before all else, we desire to act. Human nature dictates that we strive to be autonomous. If the only way we can be fully autonomous is to be sincere and authentic agents, then on the pain of violating our human nature we should strive to be sincere and authentic agents.

The second imperative concerns our roles as agents living in a society. This imperative is called the Shared Community Worldview Imperative: “Each agent must strive to create a common body of knowledge that supports the creation of a shared community worldview (that is complete, coherent, and good) through which social institutions and their resulting policies might flourish within the constraints of the essential core commonly held values (ethics, aesthetics, and religion).” There are several key elements to this imperative. First, there is the exhortation to create a common body of knowledge. This is an essential element for positive group discussion to proceed. Second, there is a dialectical process of discussion among members of one community and between members of various communities that are united in another larger heterogeneous community. This discussion should seek to form an understanding about the mission of the community within the context of the common body of knowledge and the commonly held core values held by members of the community. These values will include ethical maxims, aesthetic values, and religious values. Of course, there will be disagreements, but a process is enjoined that will create a shared worldview that is complete, coherent, and good.

Third, is that the result of this dialectical creation of a shared community worldview is to use it in the creation (or revision of) social institutions that are responsible for setting policy within the community or social unit. It should be clear that this tenet seems highly inclined toward democracy. However, it is not restricted to this. Even in totalitarian states the influence of the shared community worldview is significant. One can, for example, point to...
the great differences among communist states in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, China, North Korea, and Cuba during the 1960s to 1980. All of these states were Communist. Yet, there were great differences in the way the totalitarian regimes operated in each instance. This is because, even without the vote, the shared community worldview casts a strong influence on the operation of society’s institutions and their resultant policies.

Finally, the actions of those institutions always must be framed within the core values of the people who make up the society. Whenever the society veers too far away in its implementation of the social worldview from the personal worldviews of the members of the society, then a realignment must occur. In responsive democracies this takes the form of electing new representatives in the next election. In totalitarian regimes, change also will occur, but generally by coup d’état or armed revolution.

These two principles work together to form the basis of individual claims to the goods necessary for agency. It takes the personal perspective (The Personal Worldview Imperative) to set out what counts as a legitimate rights claim, and it takes the community perspective (The Shared Community Worldview Imperative) to allocate those goods according to who has the strongest claims. But what makes one claim for a good stronger than another? To answer this question we need one more theoretical structure. This is the Table of Embeddedness (Table 1). One good is said to be more embedded or fundamental according to its relation to committing action at all. The table begins with the most fundamental and moves to the less fundamental all the way to the superfluous.

What is the justification for this classification? Let us start at the beginning. I have parsed the basic goods into two levels. The first level is the most deeply embedded. On this level there is an appeal to the biologic conditions of agency. What does every human need to act from a biologic point of view? Every person needs so many calories (based on numerous different variables such as body mass and metabolic rate) on a regular basis. Without this requisite number of calories the individual will not be able to act, but instead will become sick and eventually die. The same is true with the second two categories of clothing and shelter. These are for the sake of maintaining a core body temperature and protecting the individual from the ravages of nature. In more temperate climates, there is less of a need for clothing, but generally some need, nonetheless, for shelter (to protect the individual from storms and high winds). Finally, is the related item of protection from unwarranted bodily harm. If a person lived in the forest without any shelter, there are many predators (large and small) that may attack him or her. From a biologic point of view, one cannot live this way for long. When we sleep we are vulnerable to attacks of all sorts. If we are totally unprotected, it is probable we will suffer.

These aforementioned considerations are important. But there are many other necessary biologic requirements. These requirements may have to do with health and the proper operation of our bodies. I have not set these out because my purpose has been to highlight those goods that might be able to be provided by society.3

The second level of basic goods (deeply embedded) concentrates on providing the agent with the goods necessary to be an effective actor within a particular society. These goods are what any agent could claim to act at a basic level of proficiency within that society. These goods are of two types. The first sort of second level basic good refers to education and skills that are necessary within some society. Because these requirements are society- or historically-specific, there is some relativism regarding the actual goods involved. However, regarding the more theoretical requirement, namely, that there are goods effecting education and skills that all members of that society need to be effective agents at a basic level.

The second sort of Level Two Basic Goods are those having to do with human liberties such as those set out in the United States Bill
TABLE 1. The Table of Embeddedness

Basic Goods

| Level One: Most Deeply Embedded (that which is absolutely necessary for human action): food, clothing, shelter, protection from unwarranted bodily harm |
| Level Two: Deeply Embedded (that which is necessary for effective basic action within any given society) |
| - Literacy in the language of the country |
| - Basic mathematical skills |
| - Other fundamental skills necessary to be an effective agent in that country (in the United States some computer literacy is necessary) |
| - The assurance that those you interact with are not lying to promote their own interests |
| - The assurance that those you interact with will recognize your human dignity (as per above) and not exploit you as a means only |
| - Basic human rights such as those listed in the United States Bill of Rights and the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights |

Secondary Goods

| Life-Enhancing: Medium to High-Medium on Embeddedness |
| Basic societal respect |
| Equal opportunity to compete for the prudential goods of society |
| Ability to pursue a life plan according to the Personal Worldview Imperative |
| Ability to participate equally as an agent in the Shared Community Worldview Imperative |

| Useful: Medium to Low Medium Embeddedness |
| Ability to use one’s real and portable property in the manner he or she chooses |
| Ability to gain from and exploit the consequences of one’s labor regardless of starting point |
| Ability to pursue goods that generally are owned by most citizens (in the United States today a telephone, television, and automobile would fit into this class) |

| Luxurious: Low Embeddedness |
| Ability to pursue goods that are pleasant even though they are far removed from action and from the expectations of most citizens within a given country (in the United States today a European vacation would fit into this class) |
| Ability to exert one’s will so that he or she might extract a disproportionate share of society’s resources for his or her own use |

of Rights and the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These goods also are necessary to be effective actors in any given society. The Secondary Goods have three groups. In the first group are the Life-Enhancing Goods (medium to high-medium embeddedness). These goods seek to enable the agent to be able to compete at an equal starting line. These goods are not as important as basic goods because basic goods enable the biologic conditions of action and the basic societal skills and the basic human rights that allow any effective action. However, that is not to say that Life-Enhancing Secondary Goods are in any way trivial. They are not. They promote equality of action and equal opportunity. The next level of Secondary Goods are those that are useful to us (medium to low-medium embeddedness). These goods are the prudential goods that most of us strive for as a primary precondition to living the sort of life that will make us happy. Again, there is some relativity here because what might make one person pleased in one country or historic era might not satisfy another. The lowest level of Secondary Goods are the luxury goods (low embeddedness). These goods are aimed at providing pleasurable accessories to action. There are many types of
luxury goods. Some are small (such as gourmet coffee beans) whereas others are very large (such as membership in an exclusive country club). The point is that this class is the farthest removed from the fundamental conditions for action.

The Worldviews of the Gun Owners Versus the Gun Controllers

With these distinctions in mind, let us explore the worldviews that have been created by the gun owners and those advocating gun control (or abolition). First, we will set out the worldviews as they exist and then we will evaluate these worldviews critically.

Gun Owners

The gun is a tool. Like any other tool it can do good or evil. It all depends on the person who owns the gun whether the tool will be used properly. Like any tool, a gun has certain primary functions including hunting, protecting cattle, target shooting, and self-protection. Let us look at these in order.

Most hunters in the United States do so as a form of recreation. There are only a small number of people who hunt, fish, and trap to stay alive. For these individuals, a gun is a much more efficient weapon for killing animals than a bow and arrow.

For the recreational hunter, owning a gun allows him or her to pursue goods that are pleasant. These individuals do not need hunting to live or to pursue a plan of life that is essential to their actualization as people. Instead, the gun provides a means for a pleasant form of relaxation and recreation.

Since the beginning of time, those individuals who tend cattle have had to protect the cattle from wolves and other predators. Although early shepherds used stones and slings as weapons, their modern counterparts use guns. In some ways stones and slings are better. They do not kill the wolf (or other predator), but merely stun the animal and cause it to leave the cattle alone. In the terminology of this essay, stones and slings have a low damage coefficient.

However, in our increasingly unbalanced ecological world it may be the case that a weapon with a higher damage coefficient may be in order. This is because the checks and balances of evolutionary nature are skewed. Because of this imbalance, it may be impossible to keep these predators at bay by hurling rocks at them. Something else is needed: a weapon that can stop a greater number of animals might be necessary not only to save the livestock, but also to save the life of the farmer.

Target shooting is a recreation that many people consider to be very pleasant. To go to a club and test one’s aim at various distances or to shoot skeet on a course are sports that are enjoyed by many Americans.

Gun Control Advocates

Gun control advocates generally focus their worldview attitudes on the very high damage coefficient that guns possess as a weapon. This means that guns are uniquely dangerous. As such, they should be regulated or prohibited. For example, these individuals will contend that if a woman gets into an argument with her boyfriend and is sufficiently agitated, then she may decide to use a weapon against the boyfriend to sustain her strong opinion. If the woman hits the man with a frying pan, then he will have a headache or possibly a concussion. However, if the woman uses a gun she is more likely to kill or perma-
nently injure the man, than if she had chosen any other weapon.

A very high percentage of murders (47.7%) are committed by people who are in the same family or who know each other. Often, such crimes are committed in the passion of the moment. One person gets mad and searches for a weapon to vent his or her anger. If a gun is available, then because of the damage coefficient, the resultant harm probably will be far greater than a weapon with a lower damage coefficient.

Those individuals who do not have guns often are fearful of those who do (lawfully and otherwise). For example, at my youngest child’s school it recently was recommended that before you approve a play date for your child at another family’s house that you ask whether there are guns in the house and what precautions are in place to protect your child from a possible firearms accident.

From the point of view of those advocating gun control, the entire tenor of the social environment changes when there are guns. In many ways, those individuals without guns are, I believe, almost as frightened by those who possess guns legally as those who possess guns illegally. This group of people thinks that the social environment will become safer all around if guns were removed from society.

A Critical Evaluation the Respective Worldviews

Gun Owners

The gun owners were divided into four groups: hunting, protecting cattle, target shooting, and self-protection. If the subsistence woodsman needs to carry a gun to live, then he would see the need for owning a gun as some form of basic good (that is, as a means of providing food, a Level One Basic Good).

The other form of hunter is one who does so because he or she finds it relaxing. The recreational hunter takes up the sport because it is pleasant for him or her to do so. Therefore, for the recreational hunter, the good of having a gun is for the purpose of pursuing a Secondary luxury good (of low embeddedness).

Those individuals who raise sheep and cattle for a living must protect their animals. As the result of human-generated pollution, the natural biome has been skewed. Predators and prey are artificially and differentially protected. Because of this, it may be the case that ecosystems are so out of balance that an unusually large pack of predatory animals might descend on a shepherd. This might make the possession of a gun more than a tool to protect one’s chosen livelihood (a life-enhancing Secondary Good), but even one’s life (a Level One Basic Good).

Target shooting is a pleasant recreation. As such, target shooting is a Secondary Good (luxury, low embeddedness).

The last and most difficult group concerns those who wish to possess guns for safety. Protection from unwarranted bodily harm is a Level One Basic Good. If owning a gun allowed one to be protected in this way, then the claims for right to gun ownership would be very strong. These relations might be categorized as shown in Table 2.

Each attribution in Table 2 seems to be solid except for the fourth category of safety.

### TABLE 2. The Relative Embeddedness of Rights Claims by Gun owners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Claimants for Gun Ownership</th>
<th>B–1</th>
<th>B–2</th>
<th>S–1</th>
<th>S–2</th>
<th>S–3</th>
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<tr>
<td>Subsistence woodsmen</td>
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<td>Recreational hunters</td>
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<td>Cattle ranchers</td>
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<td>Target practice</td>
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<tr>
<td>Safety</td>
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<td>×?</td>
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B–1, B–2 – Basic Goods Levels 1 and 2; S–1 to S–3 refer to Secondary Goods Levels 1 to 3; ? – questionable
This probably is the largest group of gun owners so that it is important to be clear on this motivation for gun ownership. The author has identified two sorts of people who wish to carry guns for protection: those who wish to carry a concealed weapon for the sake of personal protection (in what they think to be unsafe social environments) and those who keep a gun at home so that they might protect themselves in the event that someone breaks into their house and harms the family.

In the first case, one must assess the different mental attitude that one might have if he or she were to carry a concealed weapon as opposed to not carrying a concealed weapon. In my experience, I never have owned nor carried a weapon (even though I have lived in some of the highest murder rate areas in the United States). Therefore, I think that I might be able to give a personal testimony for this group. I also know people I respect who (in similar circumstances) did buy a gun. Therefore, I think that I can represent this position (although from the stance of one who made a contrary choice).

In the first case, why would someone want to carry a concealed weapon on a daily basis? This person’s worldview depicts reality as very hostile. There are people in the world, who in their pursuit of crime, would not think twice about killing. Who is the better victim in such a confrontation: the criminal or you? Most would say the criminal. But how safe are you when you pack a concealed weapon? Imagine this (typical?) situation. A mugger approaches a good citizen. Because the mugger wishes to be successful in his robbery attempt, he has his weapon already out so that at the precise moment, he places the gun barrel against the victim’s head and declaims, “Your money or your life.” Does the fact that the victim has a concealed weapon in his inner coat pocket bring him safety? If the victim is reckless, he may reach under his or her coat and pretend to deliver the wallet when he or she really is taking out the gun. The victim then reels and shoots the mugger dead. The victim thinks that he or she just has thwarted a criminal.

But is the ending of that scene very accurate? If the mugger is holding a gun to the victim’s head and makes the sort of sudden movements described, then it is just as (even more?) probable that the mugger now will shoot the victim before he or she can attempt the sort of heroics that often are depicted in the movies? If the victim is shot because he or she could not do the unrealistic feats depicted in the movies, then is he or she safer for having a concealed weapon? Certainly not.

I think that it is generally the case that unless one is an individual who encounters and reacts to dangerous situations involving firearms on a very regular basis (such as police or army personnel), that the possession of a concealed weapon will not enhance personal safety. The individual may feel empowered, but that may have something to do with a fixation on the gun and an appreciation of its intrinsic damage coefficient. If this is correct, then the possession of a concealed weapon actually may impair personal safety because it creates a false sense of security.

The second sort of case involves a person at home who possesses a gun to protect his or her household. This individual may keep a gun in the bedside stand so that if an intruder came into the house, he or she might be able to pull out the gun and defend himself or herself and the family. In reality, if the person in question had a family, then he or she should not keep a loaded gun in the bed stand. To keep a loaded gun in one’s bed stand when one has children is to invite tragedy.

Therefore, this parent (being a responsible person) keeps an unloaded gun in the bed stand and has the ammunition locked away in a chest. Let us suppose that a burglar breaks into the house and moves directly toward the bedroom. The time that it will take for the burglar to get to the bedroom is 60 seconds. The parent awakes and reaches for the gun (30 seconds). He or she rushes to get the chest key (15 seconds). He or she rummages about for the key (15 seconds). He or she opens up the chest and takes out three bullets (5 seconds). Then he or she loads her gun (15 seconds). Now he
or she is ready for the home invader, 20 seconds too late.

Obviously, this scenario is weighted against the possibility of success. But as a light sleeper myself, and having encountered a real home invasion on one occasion and many more “false alarms,” I can attest that awakening from sleep is not conducive to quick and efficient behavior. The general point is that if one is responsible (that is, keeping firearms unloaded with ammunition locked up), then it is very questionable whether having a gun at home really enhances security. Perhaps one might be more secure if he or she invested in a monitored burglar alarm system that automatically would call the police (who in most metropolitan areas will arrive on the scene within 5 minutes).

One can conclude that although protection from unwarranted bodily harm is a basic good of agency, it remains to be proved whether owning a firearm for personal safety as a concealed weapon or in one’s home really performs as promised. Given that there are many safety issues at stake, it would seem that the risk does not justify the reward.11

**Gun Control Advocates**

Gun control advocates run the risk of being accused of exaggerating the risk that personal ownership of guns really poses in our society. The detractors to gun control cite scenarios that if the majority of people in the United States (or any other country) were armed, then the level of violence would decrease. This is because normal people on the street would realize that if they were offensive or threatening in their behavior there might be a lethal consequence. This is akin to the mutual assured destruction theory that was used by the United States and the former Soviet Union during the Cold War.2 In that case being armed actually seemed to bring about peace. On this model, advocates of universal gun ownership would tout the advantages of bringing justice down to the local level.

This theory also fits in with anticentral government sentiment and returning power to the local level and people, respectively. This is because arming the population would (by these proponents) empower the people.

However, the author rejects this option. We did not live in peaceful tranquility during the Cold War. The only thing that stopped nuclear holocaust during that period, in this author’s opinion, was the fact that nations and not isolated individuals were making the decisions. Nations generally make important decisions through a group consultation framework. This tends to reduce greatly the chance that some isolated individual might act precipitously. However, with a society of armed individuals, the potentiality for erratic and irrational action is far greater. Therefore, on the individual model there are many instances of the gun being used to vent anger and despair.

This argument’s conjecture is partially based on the widespread gun use in the inner cities of the United States. The inner city is a euphemism for places of poverty. In the United States in the beginning of the twenty-first century, the contrast is stark between people who live in those geographic islands of few secondary goods and those in the mainland of affluent society. Human feelings of jealousy and justice can incite rage among the dispossessed. But it is a rage that generally is turned inward. It does not lash out at those who have or at those who control and profit from the poor. For the most part the rage is generated against compatriots who also live in poverty. The fact that poverty also is correlated statistically with certain racial and ethnic groups (such as African-Americans and Hispanic-Americans) creates another factor in the equation: prejudicial exploitation.

Because poverty and crime often go hand in hand, and because crime and firearm use certainly correlate together, then those individuals living in poverty will experience more gun violence than those individuals living elsewhere.13 This brings about an unfortunate double consequence of living poor in the inner city, namely, not only is one deprived of the secondary goods that generally are owned by most people in the society, but one is environmentally deprived of a Basic Good of Agency,
protection from unwarranted bodily harm.\textsuperscript{5} When these effects fall disproportionately on one racial or ethnic group (such as African-Americans and Hispanic-Americans), then it would seem as if that group or groups were being singled out for unjustified exploitation. If this interpretation is correct, then the plight of those in the inner cities deserves a concerted societal response.

But what does this have to do with gun control? Are we making those individuals in the inner city safer or more vulnerable by asking law-abiding citizens to turn in their guns?

**Direction for the Future**

As argued previously, I think that law-abiding citizens are not safer when they own guns. I recognize that under the definition of gun control that began this essay (gun abolition), that weapons will be differentially in the hands of criminals who would have an advantage over the law-abiding citizen in a robbery attempt. But this happens now. Because the overwhelming number of law-abiding citizens who own guns do not regularly use their guns, they are not practiced enough to be able to confront a gun-wielding thug successfully. The difference is that under gun control the ordinary citizen would not artificially rely on an incorrect apprehension of his or her personal safety. He or she will seek other forms of risk control. In addition, the possibility for collateral accidental shootings is eliminated among law-abiding citizens.

However, gun advocates might contend that if the issue of safety is unproven, why not side with those wishing to own guns, even if their wish (for safety) is not really borne out in facts. What does it hurt if individuals are allowed to exercise their autonomy?

This is an argument that is about the burden of proof. Should we allow guns unless it is shown conclusively that they do not improve personal safety or should we not allow guns unless it is shown conclusively that they do improve personal safety (and have no additional drawbacks). Imagine that there were no guns in the United States (or any other society for that matter). Now imagine that businessmen are walking forward asking for permission to allow guns to be sold to private citizens. Does anyone really think that it would pass muster? When children’s toys are sanctioned because the gun on an action figure might be swallowed and cause choking, how does anyone really expect that firearms would (in the modern age) ever be approved?

Perhaps this is unfair. The same argument could be made about tobacco (that it never would be approved). But the fact is that the guns already are legal. However, the thought experiment is not in vain. It indicates where the burden of proof ideally should lie (with the gun advocates). Another sort of test is the novus actus interveniens.\textsuperscript{2} Under this test, anything that alters the natural order must be justified because it is causally responsible for any and all ensuing consequences. Because guns are not a part of the natural order, they must be justified as interventions in that order. To do so means that the burden of proof falls on the gun advocates.

If it is correct that the burden of proof falls on the gun advocates, and if they can (at best) show that there may be some incremental (actual and not merely perceived) increase in personal safety through carrying a gun, then they may have an argument for the moral right to carry a gun. But this is only true if the incremental benefits outweigh the other collateral costs (the number of homicides among family members of otherwise law-abiding citizens, which is approximately ⅔ of all homicides). The current author does not think that gun advocates can do this on the issue of personal safety (as per my previous arguments).

There may be scenarios in which certain occupational groups (such as cattle ranchers or those living in the wilderness) need to be able lawfully to possess a firearm. The law should make such accommodations. However, in the largest group of all, those owning guns for the sake of protection, the author suggests that the perception is illusory. We are not safer when we possess guns. It is a cruel illusion. It especially is cruel among those most vulnerable in
our society, those living in poverty. Because this lot falls disproportionately on African-Americans and Hispanic-Americans, this cruel illusion has the result of increasing the burden of societal oppression on these peoples.7–9 This is shown graphically by the fact that in the most recent statistics available the rate for death attributable to firearms among African-American men is 40.3 per 100,000 as opposed to 17.4 per 100,000 among white Americans.12 This makes African-American men at 2.3 times the risk of death by firearms than their white counterparts. Guns hurt the poor the most. Therefore, those living in poverty will be greatly benefited by a policy of gun control.

Therefore, although individual applications of the personal worldview imperative might claim the right to own a gun because of the Basic of Good of protection from unwarranted bodily harm, I think that factually this claim is mistaken and that safety is not enhanced materially. This conjecture is conjoined with the considerable societal harm that ensues from the availability of and widespread possession of guns among law-abiding citizens. If guns only were available to those who could document that a Basic Good of Agency were at stake, then the dictates of the Shared Community Worldview Imperative might be realized more fully. But this picture is not likely to happen. More likely is a situation in which only the outlaws and police have guns. Whether such a picture is tenable depends on the public will. Are people willing to adopt different risk control strategies to protect their safety? Because a certain amount of the firearm injuries occur within the context of law-abiding citizens, there might be an immediate lowering of deaths and shootings. Perhaps, with time, only the well-connected criminals will be able to possess a gun. In that case, the death toll will decrease even farther. Would not this be a safer society if such results were to come to pass?

If only a small portion of this vision were to come to pass, then fewer emergency room surgeons might be faced with a young man or woman lying before him or her: a needless victim of the modern weapon with the highest damage coefficient: guns.

References