

Lecture Notes

Nick Barrowman

**The pacifist debate**

**for the class, Should Christians be Pacifists?**

Ottawa School of Theology & Spirituality

Monday, January 16, 2012

**Introduction**

I'd like to start by quoting from a book by a prominent opponent of pacifism. In the main part of my presentation I'm going to present [arguments about pacifism in a structured format](#), but I'll start with this quote as a sort of prelude because I think it raises some fundamental issues to set the scene for our discussion. Here's what Jan Narveson wrote:

“Our question, when we are in the realm of morals, is whether there is a directive that can reasonably be addressed to all persons, calling upon them to refrain from certain activities. To support such directives, there has to be a basis in the values of the persons addressed that would make acceptance of those directives reasonable for them. If the only sort of values that would do this, in the case of a given proposal, are those that virtually nobody has, then our prospect of success in proposing it as a moral principle is nil: it's a non-starter. Morals are for people, not just for angels, eccentrics, or saints. Until such time as the pacifist can persuade us to embrace his strange preferences, his program is hopeless as a proposal for general morality.”

I actually find myself in agreement with a number of the things that Narveson said, though I don't share his dismal conclusion. Here Narveson rejects pacifism on the grounds that it would require people to have “strange preferences” and hold values that “virtually nobody” does – except perhaps “angels, eccentrics, or saints”. These strong

claims stem from Narveson's consideration of extreme scenarios earlier in his book. One such scenario is if a murderous intruder were to burst into our home. Narveson asks whether we should:

“... just allow the intruder to walk all over us, pushing us out of our houses, raping our wives, tossing the children into incinerators”<sup>1</sup>

This kind of rush to the extreme occurs again and again in arguments about pacifism, and I think that is revealing.

I'd also like to point out that although Narveson writes from a secular viewpoint, he makes reference to angels and saints, thereby suggesting that pacifist principles are too much to ask of ordinary people. Like Narveson, [I will take a secular approach here](#), but I would like to note that the teachings of Jesus (like “turn the other cheek”) are similarly often dismissed as asking too much of people. Pacifism points us in a challenging direction, just as Jesus does.

Indeed, thinking of pacifism as a *direction* rather than a *location* may be helpful. To get an idea of what I mean by that, consider how we use the word “East” in English. East is a direction, although we sometimes refer to a place as “the East”<sup>2</sup>. But when you get to the location known as “the East” you can still travel in the direction “East”. We can think of pacifism like that, or, in response to Narveson's language, we might think of Pacifism not so much as a *directive* as a *direction*. With this in mind I would like to suggest that: Ultimately morality is not about **me** telling **you** what you ought to do. It is about **each of us** doing our best **to decide how best to behave**, and trying **to have that understanding actually guide our behaviour**.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Note the male perspective again.

<sup>2</sup> Classically “the East” meant the Orient (China, Japan, etc.), but we also sometimes talk about Eastern Canada as “the East”.

<sup>3</sup> It is no good trying to do what is “right” if you haven't made a serious effort to find out what the right thing is. Nor is it any good trying to find out what is right without making a serious effort to actually live by it.

## Arguments About Pacifism

Now I'd like to turn to the main part of my presentation: arguments about pacifism. I don't have time to address every argument about pacifism, pro and con. I'm sure that more will come up during the discussion time.

Let's start with one of the definitions of pacifism that Dennis cited in the last class:

**Pacifism is a commitment to peace and opposition to war.** I would broaden this to include not just opposition to war but to **violence** in general.

In the remainder of my talk I'd like to examine the following questions:

- What is violence?
- Should arguments against violence be based on pragmatism or principle?
- On what scale is pacifism relevant?
- Is pacifism feasible?

My goal is less to provide answers than to make what I think are important distinctions and raise questions that I believe deserve consideration.

### ***What is violence?***

On the surface this seems like a straightforward question. But confusion abounds.

- *Is violence force?* Not all force is violence. It is sometimes necessary—indeed imperative—to restrain people. For example small children who are endangering themselves, or mentally disturbed individuals who may harm themselves or others.
  - *Is violence force that results in physical harm?* Not all force that results in physical harm is violence. It may happen that restraining someone results in harm. Nevertheless, harm is often a marker of violence. The intent of the restraint matters. These distinctions are recognized in the law.
  - *Is violence deliberate physical harm?* Merriam-Webster defines violence as “exertion of physical force so as to injure or abuse”.
  - *What about deliberate psychological harm?*
  - *Can language be considered “violence”?* Aggressive, threatening, insulting, and abusive language

### ***Should arguments against violence be based on pragmatism or principle?***

- *(Pragmatic argument) War should be opposed because it does more harm than good.* But does war always do more harm than good? What about a situation where it does less harm than good? Does that open the door to supporting war in some situations? Does the end justify the means?
- *(Principled argument) War should be opposed because it is simply wrong.* Does that mean pacifism is an extreme position?

### ***On what scale should pacifism operate?***

- *Internal / external.* Inner peace vs. peace between people?
- *Personal / political.* Peace in our personal relationships vs. peace with people we haven't met.
- *Local / global.* Peace in our community vs. region vs. country vs. world?

Sometimes claims are made that one scale must take priority over another. For example: "We must make peace with ourselves *before* we can make peace with the world." Is that true? What are the consequences of such an idea?

### ***Is pacifism feasible?***

Pacifism is sometimes dismissed as unrealistic, impractical, unworkable. Is pacifism feasible?

- We might equally well ask whether militarism is feasible. About 160 million people died in the wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nuclear weapons threaten to wipe out life on Earth, and a full scale nuclear war very nearly took place during the Cuban Missile Crisis. These and many other considerations call into question the feasibility of our current system.
- What about Hitler? I don't have any easy answers, but here are some notable points. WWII left over 60 million dead. Hitler was very much a product of WWI

and the punitive terms of the Treaty of Versailles: War begets war. WWII was not as righteous as is often portrayed: it was not fought to save the Jews, and the Allies also committed atrocities. I don't think war was the answer.

- We might also question why a moral position is being judged on feasibility. Consider an analogous question: Is faithfulness in marriage feasible? Regardless of how that question might be evaluated on psychological, sociological, or statistical grounds, marital fidelity is still widely seen as a laudable goal.
- In the end, pacifism cannot provide guarantees (if it did, there would be no debate). History provides many examples of courageous acts of nonviolent resistance. Sometimes they were successful (consider the civil rights movement and the townsfolk of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon who saved the lives of between 3 and 5,000 Jews during the Holocaust), while in other cases they were not successful. But even in these cases, it is worth noting that by steadfastly refusing to surrender to the logic of violence, pacifists demonstrate that there is another way for humanity – a way of peace.