

Gun Ownership

By Socrates

The issue of gun ownership often comes up after reports of mass shootings. Recently there was a mass shooting in Las Vegas. This prompted a dialogue between myself and a gun enthusiast. The dialogue was documented by a friend of mine (Brent Silby) and appears below. As with many of my dialogues, this one ends in aporia. That means it ends inconclusively, at an impasse.

Mick: Gun laws won't help because criminals won't follow those laws. The only thing gun laws will achieve is making it more difficult for law abiding citizens to buy guns for self protection.

Socrates: Are you saying, then, that making it more difficult to get a gun will have no impact on shootings in the U.S?

Mick: That's right. Criminals will just acquire guns illegally. Apparently the weapon used for the recent massacre was illegally purchased. And the killers in Europe had illegal AKs, did they not?

Socrates: So you think that the same number of shootings will occur regardless of gun ownership rates. What about cases in which a toddler finds their parent's gun and accidentally shoots someone? In these cases, the parent's gun is legally owned. This sort of thing wouldn't happen if gun ownership was more difficult, right?

Mick: If a drunk driver runs me over and kills me, it's not the car's fault. It's how it's used.

Socrates: We are talking about guns, are we not? Why do you mention car accidents?

Mick: The point is that we don't make car ownership illegal just because sometimes they are involved in deaths.

Socrates: I see. You are making an analogy. I wonder if it is a good analogy. Let's briefly examine it. Are cars designed as weapons?

Mick: Of course not. But they can be used as weapons intentionally or accidentally.

Socrates: What are cars designed for?

Mick: Obviously for transportation.

Socrates: And you agree that they are not designed as weapons. So when a car used according to its function, it does not kill people or animals. It's only if it is misused that it causes such harm.

Mick: That's right.

Socrates: What are guns designed for?

Mick: For self defence.

Socrates: Anything else?

Mick: For hunting animals. And soldiers use them in war.

Socrates: When a person is killed with a gun, would you say that the gun was functioning according to its design?

Mick: Sure. But it isn't the gun's fault.

Socrates: That's right. It is the person's fault. They are using the gun according to its design — to kill someone else. That is why your car analogy doesn't work. If a car is involved in a death it is being operated

counter to its design intention. But guns are designed as weapons. That is what we are talking about. Shall we continue?

Mick: Okay then.

Socrates: Would you agree that if absolutely nobody owned a gun, no one would die in a gun related incident?

Mick: If absolutely nobody owned a gun, people would still be killed in other ways. There would be calls for knife-control instead.

Socrates: We are talking about guns. Will you answer the question?

Mick: And you're asking what would happen if nobody owned a gun. If absolutely nobody owned a gun there would still be murder. Murder is totally possible without guns.

Socrates: I'm talking about gun related deaths, not deaths by other means. My question is quite simple. It requires a yes or no answer. If absolutely nobody owned a gun would there be any gun related deaths?

Mick: Such a hypothetical situation would never exist in the first place, because if the government absolutely shut down every gun manufacturer and every kind of legal gun ownership whatsoever, there would be a black market for such objects.

Socrates: You still refuse to answer my question. I wonder why.

Mick: Define "No one" owning a gun. Would police still have guns? The army? Be specific.

Socrates: Yes, defining terms is a good place to start. I had hoped that I was specific when I said "absolutely nobody". That means *absolutely* no-one. No guns at all. If absolutely nobody owned a gun, would there be any gun related deaths?

Mick: No, if not a single person owned a gun in the entire world, there would be no gun-related deaths!

My question is, how would you go about achieving something like that? We live in a world where a man once crushed/mixed rocks into dust and used it as propulsion, then another man used that propulsion to invent the hand cannon, only for a third man to take that hand cannon and reduce it in size to invent a gun.

How would you get absolutely all of the lovers of weapons technology to collectively agree to dispose of their guns?

And if you did miraculously un-invent the firearm, how would you keep it uninvented? How would you make sure that in a-hundred-and-fifty years time a bright engineer wouldn't create a newer, more efficient and destructive way of ending life?

We've been killing each other long before firearms we invented. One day, a Neanderthal picked up a sharp rock and was suddenly the most powerful of his kind.

Socrates: Thanks for answering my question. I agree with your answer that there would be no gun related deaths in a world with absolutely no guns. As to your question, I don't know the answer because I cannot foresee the future.

Nevertheless, in your question you predict that future. You assume the inevitability of people killing each other. That assumption may or may not be true. But even if it is true, I am not sure it follows that we should support the supply of more weapons. For all we know, making it harder for people to kill other people might result in fewer deaths.

But back to my first question. I now have a follow up question: if one person had a gun — just one person — would the probability of a gun related death increase from zero? (Maybe to something low like 0.0001).

Mick: Of course! It goes without saying. If you bring a gun back into the equation then a gun related death is a possibility.

And people killing each other IS an inevitability. It is built into our nature. Our instincts. To survive. To fight. To kill or be killed. We may be evolved, but we will always be animals. And whether we like it or not, at one point or another, in one way or another, we will each have our basic instincts take over.

Socrates: You may be right about our instinct for killing each other. I can't confirm your hunch, because I don't know. Still, as I said above, I don't think it follows that we should continue to make it more convenient for people to kill by allowing access to guns. Your argument that "people are going to kill each other anyway so we might as well let them all have guns" seems to me to be poorly reasoned.

Let's continue with the dialogue. Based on our dialogue so far, we now have a working premise:

P1. Because the probability of gun related deaths increases with increased gun ownership, reduced gun ownership will mean a lower probability of gun related deaths.

Here is another question. Do we want to reduce gun related deaths?

Mick: Of course we do.

Socrates: If we want to reduce gun related deaths we should either take appropriate action or do nothing? Which option do you think would best achieve the goal of reducing gun related deaths?

Mick: I would be an idiot if I said do nothing. We need to do something.

Socrates: I agree. Allow me to summarize this thought in premise, conclusion form:

P2. Because we want to reduce gun related deaths, we should either take appropriate action or do nothing

P3. Doing nothing would not achieve our goal, so we should do something.

C1. Therefore, because we want to reduce gun related deaths, we should take appropriate action (from P2, P3)

Now we have agreed that reduced gun ownership lowers the probability of gun related deaths, have we not?

Mick: Yes.

Socrates: Our next premise can be presented as:

P4. Because reduced gun ownership lowers the probability of gun related deaths, reducing gun ownership is appropriate action.

And now that we have the argument structure in place, we can follow the logic to its conclusion:

C2. Therefore, we should reduce gun ownership (from P1, C1, P4)

This deductive argument points to a course of action. For clarity, let us run through the argument again.

P1. Because the probability of gun related deaths increases with increased gun ownership, reduced gun ownership will mean a lower probability of gun related deaths.

P2. Because we want to reduce gun related deaths, we should either take appropriate action or do nothing

P3. Doing nothing would not achieve our goal, so we should do something.

C1. Therefore, because we want to reduce gun related deaths, we should take appropriate action (from P2, P3)

P4. Because reduced gun ownership lowers the probability of gun related deaths, reducing gun ownership is appropriate action.

C2. Therefore, we should reduce gun ownership (from P1, C1, P4)

I can tell by the look on your face that you are not convinced.

Mick: No, I am not. I do not think it is fair to penalize innocent gun owners just because some people use guns for killing.

Socrates: But you must agree that the logic of the argument leads to the conclusion. If you don't like the conclusion, you are either thinking irrationally or you think the argument is unsound. If you think it is unsound, then you must disagree with one of the premises. Which one?

Mick: I don't know. You are using your logic to make me agree to something I don't agree with. I don't think you should take away people's right to own guns.

Socrates: Ah. It seems to me that you are disagreeing with our premise that reducing gun ownership is appropriate action.

Mick: Yes. That's right. I don't think it is appropriate. I think it is inappropriate. People have the right to own guns.

Socrates: I understand what you are saying. Still, you do agree that appropriate action should be taken, right? After all, you agreed that doing nothing is not going to help.

Mick: There should be appropriate action taken.

Socrates: Well, other than reducing gun ownership, what would that be?

Mick: I don't know. I'm getting tired of this.

Socrates: We agreed that reduced gun ownership would result in reduced deaths by guns. So when we followed our logic, found that the appropriate course of action is to reduce gun ownership, right? Unless you can come up with an alternative. What is your alternative?

Mick: I will have to think about it. For now I'm done with this.

Socrates: I do hope we can pick this up again soon.