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# Philosophy & Gun Control: Introduction

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**T**his issue of *Essays in Philosophy* explores, through philosophical analysis, the difficult and thorny subject of gun control. The impetus for proposing this issue was the lack of critical and reflective philosophical dialogue on the subject and what I viewed to be an increased need for engagement in a rational and measured debate about the ethics of owning guns and the permissibility of regulating or restricting their ownership.

Typical treatments of the topic engage with the conflict between individual rights of autonomy and self-defense and collective rights of freedom from assault and violence. There are also conflicting claims about the ideal way to protect individuals in a society. Some suggest that more private ownership of guns increases collective security and decreases crime, while others suggest the contrary: the presence of more guns decreases safety and increases the possibility of

violent crime. More generally, there is a concern about the obligation of the state and its institutions in assuring autonomy rights, social security, and individual protection.

I am excited to announce that the six contributors who have written essays for this issue reside in four different countries and offer wide-ranging insights that I hope will serve to advance this discussion in an interesting and productive manner.

Kocsis' essay "Gun Ownership and Gun Culture in the United States of America" starts this issue and establishes an excellent foundation for the remainder of the articles. Kocsis explores three related arguments that he claims have not received their due examination in previous debates. First, he examines the notion of liberty and the rights concerning property and protection. He explores the status of guns as private property and the relationship between property, liberty, and personal identity.

Second, Kocsis relates his previous examination to contemporary American culture. He suggests that the ideals discussed previously have embedded themselves into American culture and that we must judge gun ownership against a backdrop of substantive cultural norms.

Finally, he explains that freedom, when properly conceptualized, might not involve the freedom *to* guns, but instead, a freedom *from* guns. He employs Rawlsian ideals in a novel manner to arrive at a tentative conclusion that contractors in the original position, behind a veil of ignorance, might tend toward gun safety.

Next, Hsiao's essay, "Against Gun Bans and Restrictive Licensing" challenges Kocsis' final assertion and suggests that even if the harm introduced into society by permitting

private citizens to own guns is outweighed by the benefits, neither an outright ban, nor restrictive policies are justified. In other words, simply because guns either have the potential to introduce more harm, or in fact, do introduce harm, is insufficient grounds to prohibit gun ownership. In short, because prohibiting guns (or heavily restricting their ownership) is the most restrictive manner in which to address the potential for violent assault associated with guns, other, less restrictive avenues must be explored first.

In “Limited Government and Gun Control,” Ponzer responds by suggesting that the principle of limited government often used against gun control laws provides, on the contrary, justification for enacting stronger restrictions on gun ownership. Ponzer focuses on the two-sided intent of the Bill of Rights and argues for an increased acknowledgement of the importance of not only restraining the power of the federal government, but of also protecting the rights of individuals. He suggests that the government has the constitutional authority (and perhaps more strongly, obligation), to enact stricter gun control regulations because the security of its citizens is at stake.

In my own essay, “On Risk and Responsibility: Gun Control and the Ethics of Hunting,” I offer a similar justification for gun control. I suggest that rights that involve mere preference satisfaction (the right to own a gun for the purposes of hunting) should be trumped when at odds with rights that are intrinsically good (such as the right to bodily health and to be free from violent assault and bodily injury). I argue that responsibility for the risk of violent assault that citizens are subjected to by others owning a gun should be properly attributed to both the gun owner, as well as those charged with protecting citizens from harm and initiating policy designed to guarantee and defend a robust set of rights: the Government.

In “Gun Violence Agnosticism,” Bernstein responds to the previous essay and advocates of gun control to suggest that agnosticism about the criminogenic effects of gun control is all that is warranted. Bernstein systematically explores the evidence to engage with three hypotheses: the crime-increasing hypothesis; the homicide-increasing hypothesis; and the anti-carrying hypothesis. Ultimately, Bernstein concludes that gun ownership neither causes significant increases in the rate of violent crime, nor in the rates of homicide. Finally, he suggests that laws that permit citizens to carry concealed firearms in public do not increase violent crime rates.

Müller concludes this volume with his essay titled “Gun Control: A European Perspective.” In his piece, Müller responds to Bernstein and examines the prevalence of gun violence outside the United States to arrive at a conclusion about gun control and the potential for violence: mainly, less guns implies less potential for violent assault. Müller offers a utility-based justification for his defense of gun control and suggests that if we were to imagine two worlds, one with tight gun control, and another with loose gun control, the former and not the latter, would have more pleasure and less pain overall and thus, owning a gun would violate a social contract of sorts if we were all to acknowledge this utility-maximizing goal as our mutual obligation.

I remain convinced that the discussion of gun control is not one that is likely to end due to the reaching of an amicable solution any time soon. Nonetheless, I hope that facilitating rational, measured discussions of the topic in a careful and considered manner will help to expose some weaknesses in thinking on both sides. I hope people can begin to step away from emotional responses to the topic and instead, engage in critical reflection of the arguments being offered by both

advocates of stricter gun ownership regulations, as well as those opposed to such restrictions. I am happy to say that I view the contributions contained within this volume to have gone well beyond satisfying this goal of mine.