
Is Pacifism Irrational?

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When I tell others I disavow the use of violence in any and all its forms, I get different responses. My critics view my pacifism as essentially irrational. They can easily think of circumstances when the only rational action would be to initiate violence in self-defense or to defend others. Allowing oneself or others to be hurt by not acting, they say, would not only be irrational but also morally decrepit.

This critique, or variants of it, has come from a wide range of theorists and policy makers. A hypothetical scenario in such a refutation of pacifism might run something like this. Imagine a deranged and hostile malefactor who's intent on destroying a sizeable portion of humanity. Only you stand between the villain and the doomsday device which, if used, will destroy whole continents. The only way you can prevent the machine from being used, however, is by using violence. Surely our intuition would suggest that in this case violence would not only be permissible, but also necessary, since hurting the malefactor is a lesser evil than allowing so many innocent people die.

Therefore, it is claimed, if pacifism forswears violence in all circumstances, then surely it is a misguided philosophy. With this perspective, my imagined interlocutor has gone to the heart of popular misgivings about an unconditional commitment to nonviolence: it illustrates why most people worldwide consider pacifism to be irrational.

But it would be far too hasty to use this hypothetical exercise to judge pacifism to be irrational. To begin with, let's take a closer look at how my critic's argument is supposed to work. Logically, the claim that all acts of violence are morally wrong can be demonstrated false by pointing to an act of violence that is not morally wrong. Moreover, it is widely held that if a moral principle is true at all it must be true in any imaginable situation. Thus, I cannot defend myself by simply indicating that it's unlikely I'll ever find myself standing between a villain and a doomsday button. The point is that I could find myself in such a position. In short, it is widely assumed that if we can even imagine a situation in which a certain ethical principle fails to hold, then the principle is mistaken.

Philosophers who doubt a moral principle typically create a hypothetical situation that will help illuminate the problem. They call these hypothetical situations *Gedankenexperiments* or thought experiments. My interlocutor might, for example, have cited a less remote example, perhaps an actual event from history or the newspapers. But hypothetical scenarios are usually viewed as preferable because most actual events are controversial and people often disagree about their morality or immorality. Hypotheticals, however, promote greater ex-

tremes—such as the villain and the doomsday machine—and thus make it much more difficult to tow the pacifist line.

Even so, I might ask my critics why they think violence would be justified in such a case. To them it might seem obvious why violence is the rational choice. But better theorists will suggest a guiding principle for evaluating actions as right and wrong, rational or irrational. According to most rational choice analyses, the rational one is the available alternative that can be expected to have optimal consequences. Anyone familiar with ethical theory knows that this closely resembles popular accounts of morality, especially those that equate morality with the act that will provide the greatest good for the greatest number.

Whatever bad consequences might result from committing violence against our villain, they are presumably still much better overall than the consequences of destroying whole continents. Thus, if my only choices are to allow whole continents to be destroyed or to commit a single act of violence, the correct choice would be the latter. Of course, these are not the only understandings of morality or rationality, but even those who accept different models might view pacifism as irrational because it sometimes advocates actions with unacceptable results compared to the other available options.

My biggest objection to this reasoning, and to the entire thought-experiment methodology, is its overly narrow focus on the present. It fails to consider how the pasts of the people in hypothetical scenarios would have shaped the actions open to them. The ability to rank all the available choices is central to this understanding of rationality. The rational choice is the one choice that has the best expected consequences. But how are the possible courses of action determined? Rarely is this given a second thought. Those who pose thought experiments assume they can determine the options available to their agents, but this is a serious mistake.

Of course, the agents consist of those he or she can perform. But what does “can” mean here? Certainly it does not include everything we can imagine happening. For example, we can imagine me snapping my fingers and making the doomsday machine disappear, or even wiggling my nose and eliminating the villain’s belligerence. Certainly if those so-called choices were included in our rational calculation, they would be better than violence. They have been excluded because they violate the laws of nature. But if the laws of nature define what “can” be done, then a whole new set of problems arises.

Scientific determinism raises the possibility that, given a person’s biochemical and neurophysiological make-up, only one possible course of action might be possible, at any given time, according to the laws of nature. But one need not be a full-scale determinist to grasp my point: people are sometimes psychologically incapable of performing acts they might otherwise seem able to do.

For example, if Martians would invade Earth and threaten to destroy much of our world if I did not rape, torture, kill and mutilate an innocent four-year old girl, no matter how rational the act might seem, I simply could not bring myself to do it. The psychological barriers would be too strong. But we need not take such an extreme example. Drug addicts, for example, need help before they can

quit abusing. They cannot do it on their own for very real physiological and psychological reasons.

What things we psychologically can and cannot do depends on many factors, including genetics, physiology, socialization, upbringing and the personal experiences that shape our personalities and characters. Psychologists try to uncover these factors but much remains unexplained about our behavioral dispositions. Suffice it to say that our behavioral patterns are, indeed, shaped. This is what the critics of pacifism ignore.

Here is the crux: violence is possible only for those who are psychologically capable of violent behavior. If I am the only one standing between our ne'er-do-well and the doomsday machine, it could only be rational for me to commit violence if I am capable of doing so. If I have cultivated in myself a psychological inability to commit violence, then committing violence, whatever favorable consequences it would have, is not even on the list of available options.

For our hypothetical scenario to show pacifism truly to be irrational, it would have to demonstrate not only that violence would lead to far better results but also that it would have been irrational for the person to have eliminated her capability for violent behavior. For a person such as myself who sees the commitment to pacifism not so much as the view that violence is wrong in all conceivable circumstances but rather that it is rational for me to try to eliminate within myself the capacity for violence, these counter-examples beg the question.

If I ever did find myself in the hypothetical situation and if I could commit violence, then I rationally ought to do so. But this does nothing to quell my belief that, since I am extraordinarily unlikely ever to find myself in any such scenario, it is still rational for me (and those in relevantly similar positions) to try to eliminate my capacity for violence.

But my critic might argue that, since I might find myself in the hypothetical situation and since my failure to act would have such horrible consequences, then I should not eliminate my capacity to do violence. But here the unlikelihood of the scenario becomes a factor. When considering what it is rational, I need only consider what has a serious chance of occurring. No one would consider my inability to rape and mutilate small children irrational simply because it is conceivable that aliens could come down and threaten to destroy the Earth if I do not. It is simply too remote a possibility to take seriously. The same can be said of the villain and the doomsday device. I have no reason to think I would ever find myself in such a situation, and so it alone provides no reason for me to doubt my commitment to pacifist ideals.

In response to this, my interlocutor might change the thought experiment. I might be asked to consider similar cases that I might think are feasible, when my own life or that of one or two friends or family is threatened by a common criminal, for example, and the only way I can stop the threat is through violence. But even here I am skeptical. It's certainly feasible that I might become a victim of crime, perhaps even of a violent crime. But it's very unlikely I will ever find myself in a situation where nonviolent actions would not be available as an alternative to my committing violence. Still, my interlocutor might insist that, however unlikely this might be, its very possibility makes pacifism irrational, at

least in the absence of positive reasons for thinking that cultivating an inability to be violent is a good idea.

But there are positive reasons. What are the costs to society from allowing people to develop and maintain the capacity for violence? Psychologists and social theorists have only begun to address this question. But let's consider the findings of Lt. Colonel Dave Grossman, a member of the United States Military and a faculty member at Arkansas State University. Grossman has focused on the psychological costs of killing. Military leaders have long known that it is very difficult to teach people to kill. It is much easier to teach a person to sacrifice his or her own life than to take the life of another.

To overcome this difficulty, military trainers have relied on a long process of desensitization. At times they have even clamped soldiers' heads facing a screen, forced their eyes open and coerced them into watching films of gratuitous violence until they became accustomed to it. Fortunately, this is no longer done. Even so, the modern military still needs Pavlovian and Skinnerian conditioning techniques to turn young men and women into potential killers. What are the costs of such training? The soldier often becomes desensitized to violence in general. Whether "right" or "wrong," all seems acceptable. The soldier is particularly susceptible to mental illness. The prevalence of post-traumatic stress and other disorders among veterans is staggering.

Yet the greatest costs from training people to kill might not be borne by the soldiers themselves. Grossman claims that the great increase in assaults, murders and other violent crimes in America over the past 50 years has come largely from the tendency of film, television, and literature to depict graphic violence as necessary, heroic and even normal. In effect, we are raising whole generations of people desensitized to killing, and our crime rates show it.

While Grossman has written narrowly on killing, I would like to speculate more broadly on the psychology of violence. While even now perhaps only some of us have become capable of killing, most of us—at least most males in Western culture—are capable of some milder forms of violence. The rates of rape, child abuse, and domestic violence testify to this.

What causes this? Could it be because we are inundated at a very young age with fictional and historical accounts of "heroes" who save the world, foiling the villain's plan to conquer or destroy? Could it be because they do so by outfighting, outgunning, overpowering or outstrategizing the antagonist in violent contests? Notice how strongly these stories—rampant throughout literature, television, cinema, history, the news and every other medium—resemble the thought experiment discussed earlier. The stories of our culture provide the basis for the non-pacifist perspective. Even at an early age, we accept the need to be violent sometimes, and with that acceptance comes our ability to do so. We learn to stand up to the bully, to fight back against the assailant, to commit the righteous and rational act of violence when "necessary."

What are the costs of this training in so-called heroic violence? All would be well if this capacity for violence were used only in heroic cases, only when actually necessary, only in defense of the self and others. But as often as we find

these heroic acts of violence in our newscasts, television series, and history and literature books, in real life they are few and far between.

Humans are fallible creatures. Once they have internalized the belief that violence is sometimes necessary and justified, they tend to act on it inappropriately. The abusive parent believes the child must learn their lesson and that beating them is the only way to teach it. The violent husband believes he is justified in hitting his wife when he is not. A critic of the American government concludes that change will come only by destroying a federal building in Oklahoma.

People commonly misunderstand situations, and come to believe that violence is the only rational course of action. Those horrendous acts of violence we loathe so much may have their roots in the very same conditioning as the so-called heroic acts. But many more unacceptable acts are committed than the heroic ones. Rather than conditioning people into violence, we must eliminate people's ability to be violent. Otherwise we'll continue experiencing morally reprehensible acts of violence. So, against my critic who says it is rational for me to maintain my capacity for violence because I might find myself in a situation where I need it to rightly defend myself or others, I argue that this capacity would far more likely be used for rape, child abuse, domestic violence or some other morally repugnant act.

My claims about the costs and causes of violence cannot be proved. Too little empirical evidence has been gathered to draw fixed conclusions. But I've not sought to establish conclusively that pacifism is rational; I'm only suggesting that hypothetical thought experiments do not demonstrate pacifism's irrationality.

Still, further evidence exists. Beyond Grossman's work, we can consider the research on handguns and self-defense in the United States. Many people feel safer having a handgun, believing they can use it to thwart a potential criminal. But while handguns have sometimes been used this way, it rarely happens. Instead, FBI crime reports (from 1993 and 1994) show that a gun is 43 times more likely to be used against the person who bought it or against another family member than it is against a criminal intruder. You're better off without a gun. Buying a gun to make yourself safer is irrational.

What is true about guns is true about violence generally. Our capacity for violent behavior is much more likely to be used in unacceptable ways than in heroic ways. While we could imagine situations where violence leads to better consequences, when we look at the big picture, can we really claim that conditioning people to commit violence produces better results than the alternatives?

Of course, I might have shown only that pacifism is not irrational for someone such as myself, a graduate student in a small academic community in Midwestern America, with no particular worries about my livelihood. However rational pacifism may be for me, it might be argued that it is nevertheless rational for society to include some people who can commit violence, who can serve as police or armed service officers, and others who can be trained for violence without leading to worse results than not having that training. I can't answer that question. Instead I can only devise what's moral for

me to do or to be. It's best to leave it to others to decide for themselves whether my situation also applies to them.

One might wonder, however, whether some people could completely eliminate their ability to be violent while others maintain their violent capacities. Those who have been most trained for violence—our police and militaries—are also those who are most often portrayed as heroes in stories that rationalize the need for violence. Thus, if we don't want the rest of society to develop violent capabilities, then we must stop portraying as heroes those who do use violence.

If I am successful in becoming the sort of person I want to be, then were I to be the only one standing between a maniacal villain and a doomsday device, I would be powerless to commit violence to stop the villain. But I would also be the sort of person who could never abuse a child, hit his wife, or force someone else into having sex. I would be someone who would pursue alternative options no matter how much it seemed that violence was necessary. In this I see nothing irrational but rather only something beautiful and hopeful.

RECOMMENDED READING

Grossman, Dave. 1995. *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in Society*. New York: Little, Brown & Company.

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