

The Right to Own a Gun

Michael Huemer

Janus Forum, UVM, 9/14/2017

I. The Accomplice-to-Crime Argument

Examples

E1 Killer enters Victim's house. Accomplice holds Victim down while Killer stabs Victim to death.

Verdict: Accomplice's action is not much better than Killer's.

E2 Killer enters Victim's house. Victim intends to defend self with gun. Accomplice grabs gun and runs away. Killer stabs Victim to death.

Verdict: Accomplice's action is not much better than Killer's.

E3 Citizen wants to own a gun for self-defense. State forcibly prevents Citizen from having a gun, or takes away Citizen's gun. Citizen is then victimized by a criminal.

Verdict?

Argument

- 1 Gun control laws coercively prevent some individuals from defending themselves against crimes.
- 2 Coercively preventing someone from defending themselves against a crime is seriously wrong.
 - Sc., it is morally comparable to committing the crime. Support: See examples 1-2 above.
- 3 So gun control laws are seriously wrong.
 - Sc., they are morally comparable to the state committing multiple murders, rapes, assaults, and robberies.

II. Rights vs. Consequences

Examples

E4 A crime causing great public outrage has occurred. Unless someone is punished, there will be riots, causing injury to many innocent people. The sheriff cannot find the criminal, but he can frame an innocent person, to forestall the riots.

Verdict: Do not frame the innocent.

E5 Somehow, killing one innocent person will prevent a world war.

Verdict: Maybe kill the innocent person.

Conclusions

- It is wrong to violate an individual's rights, even to produce greater, comparable benefits to others.
- It may be justified to violate an individual's rights to produce *many times* greater benefits for others.
- So:
 - Gun control is wrong, even to prevent greater, comparable harm to others.
 - Gun control might be justified, (only) if it prevented *many times* as much harm as it caused.

III. Costs and Benefits: Empirical Evidence

- Defensive gun uses: Widely varying estimates. (55,000 – 4.7 million per year) (Kleck: 2.5 million)
- Concealed weapons: "Shall-issue" laws may reduce crime (Lott).

IV. Further Reading

M. Huemer, "Is There a Right to Own a Gun?" *Social Theory and Practice* 29 (2003): 297-324, <http://www.ow1232.net/guncontrol.htm>.

———. "Gun Rights and Noncompliance: Two Problems Of Prohibition," *The Critique*, 7/14/2016, <http://www.thecritique.com/articles/gun-rights-noncompliance/>.

National Research Council, *Firearms and Violence: A Critical Review* (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2005), <http://www.nap.edu/read/10881>.