

The Pacifist Tradition and Pacifism as Transformative and Critical Theory

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Abstract: Pacifism is often painted into a corner as an absolute rejection of all violence and war. Such a dogmatic and negative formulation of pacifism does leave us with pacifism as a morally problematic position. But pacifism is not best understood as a negative claim. Nor is pacifism best understood as a singular or monistic concept. Rather, there is a “pacifist tradition” that is grounded in an affirmative claim about the importance of nonviolence, love, community building, and peaceful conflict resolution. This more positive conception of pacifism aims to transform social and political life. When understood in this way, pacifism is a robust and useful critical social theory. This paper explores the philosophy of pacifism in an attempt to reconceptualize pacifism as a tradition of normative critical theory. The paper argues that pacifism ought to be understood on analogy with other critical theories—such as feminism; that pacifism should be understood in terms of the “pacifist tradition”—along lines familiar from interpretations of the “just war tradition”; and that pacifism should be seen as offering interesting themes and ideas that are worthy of philosophical attention.

Keywords: pacifism, nonviolence, critical theory, moral theory, peace, tradition

Introduction

The pacifist tradition is complex and important. This tradition has often been overlooked in contemporary social and political philosophy and in moral philosophy. A primary goal of the present paper is to argue that the pacifist tradition is worthy of serious philosophical consideration. Pacifism is a serious

and legitimate normative theory. It ought to be included among the primary focal points of ethics, social thought, and political philosophy.¹

Pacifists hold that peace is good. They also hold that nonviolent means must be employed in pursuit of peace. In a sense, pacifism is an unremarkable idea. Most people take peace for granted as one of the ends of life; and mostly these days, we avoid violence. But peace—like other normative concepts—is a complex idea that deserves deep and careful reflection. The interdisciplinary field of peace studies has emerged to help us understand this idea. Peace is studied from a variety of angles using various methodologies in the social sciences. Philosophers contribute to this effort by offering normative insights about nonviolence and peace, connected with a critical theory of violence.

The history and sociology of peace demonstrate that our norms have become less violent. Human beings have generally become more peaceful. We no longer fight duels. Domestic violence and cruelty to animals have been criminalized. The death penalty is gradually being abolished. We are more sensitive to the problem of collateral damage in war. We acknowledge the existence of war crimes. Steven Pinker has shown that violence is decreasing in frequency and severity (*Better Angels; Enlightenment Now*). The story that Pinker tells is not linear, nor is it complete. We continue to build terribly destructive weapons. And a few people—usually men—remain enamored of violence. They beat their children, their wives, their animals, and other men. But these forms of violence are no longer taken for granted. Feminists, animal rights advocates, and defenders of children have worked tirelessly to change our norms. The work of these critics has usually been inspired by pacifist insights. Key figures in this history include: Jane Addams, who advocated for international peace along with women's rights; Albert Schweitzer, whose idea of reverence for life includes animals and other human beings; and Eglantyne Jebb, whose advocacy for children was linked to her criticism of war. As a result of this work and the long history of pacifist thought, violence is usually understood as wrong and anomalous. And these days, when wars are fought, they are thought to need special justification and a narrow and limited focus.

While human beings generally value peace, outright affirmation of pacifism is less widespread. One reason for this is that pacifism is often misunderstood and marginalized. There appears to be something shameful, stupid, or naive about pacifism.² In a bygone era, pacifists were maligned as weak

¹The present essay builds upon ideas I have presented in *Transformative Pacifism*. The present essay significantly expands upon the idea of pacifism as a tradition resting upon a metaphysical conception of human flourishing.

²David Cortright, a well-known scholar of peace, has argued that the terminology of pacifism should be set aside. Cortright writes: "To be called a pacifist is almost an insult, to be labeled cowardly or selfish, unwilling to fight for what is right" (1). Cortright

and effeminate. Teddy Roosevelt claimed, for example, that pacifists were “eunuchs.”³ The Rooseveltian cult of manly virtue is connected to a militaristic celebration of war in history, holidays, and cultural mythology. Feminists and pacifists have offered a critique of this idea. But our culture continues to be permeated with violence—what is called “cultural violence” (Galtung 1990). This makes it seem that violence is natural, normal, and inevitable—despite the fact that nonviolent norms prevail in social and political life.

This ideological confusion helps explain why pacifism has often been marginalized in social and political philosophy and in ethics and moral philosophy. Absolute pacifism is rejected by appealing to exceptional cases where violence seems either inevitable or justifiable. And thus, instead of focusing on the normative project of peace-building and criticizing violence, philosophers tend to focus on the question of when and how to justify violence.⁴ Social and political philosophy have also typically focused on questions related to justice, while offering structural accounts of sovereignty and the distribution of power. Normative moral theory has typically focused on questions about duty, respect for persons, and the distribution of happiness. These are important concerns. But the question of peace is also a central concern. Indeed, one could argue that justice, equality, respect, and even happiness can be reinterpreted in light of peace. Sovereignty and legitimacy are connected to domestic political tranquility. Happiness occurs when we are at peace. Equality, justice, and respect are ways to promote peaceful social relations.

also says: “The meaning of pacifism has been distorted beyond the point where it can be restored to the original intent. It is best to set the term aside and to describe the practice and theory of peace in the context of more contemporary terms, such as peace-building and peacemaking” (334).

³Roosevelt said: “Action is what makes thought operative and valuable. Above all, the peace prattlers are in no way blessed. On the contrary, only mischief has sprung from the activities of the professional peace prattlers, the ultrapacifists, who, with the shrill clamor of eunuchs, preach the gospel of the milk and water of virtue and scream that belief in the efficacy of diluted moral mush is essential to salvation” (244).

⁴An analysis of *The Philosopher’s Index* that I conducted in October 2018 helps to quantify this point. Searching for key terms in the Index resulted in the following results: Pacifism: 441 hits; Nonviolence: 436 hits; Peace: 2,849 hits; War: 8,037 hits; Just War: 998 hits. The methodology here would require much further refinement. But my point is that philosophers tend to be much more interested in war and the justification of war than in peace and pacifism. When I presented this data at a public forum in November 2018, one member of the audience pointed out that this made sense since war is more spectacular and the justification of war seems to be oxymoronic. Peace and pacifism, by contrast, seem to be boring and uninteresting. As this commentator put it, “of course we all value peace, but it is the justification of war that is more philosophically interesting.” This claim makes my point for me: the normative consensus focuses on peace, while justifications of violence are focused on rare (and problematic) exceptions.

And so on. We can reinterpret many of the concerns of normative theory from a pacifist point of view, which I do in a schematic fashion in what follows.

Pacifism offers a comprehensive critical social theory. This theory helps us to think critically about violence, war, militarism, cultural images of violence, and the exceptional nature of the rare cases in which violence can be justified. To admit that violence can, in rare cases, be justified is to admit that pacifism need not be construed as an absolutist moral position. There are some absolute pacifists who require strict nonviolence that can even become a policy of nonresistance to evil. But the pacifist tradition admits of a continuum (Cady, *From Warism*). There are varieties of pacifism, which will differ about exceptional cases. But the core of pacifism is not primarily interested in those exceptional cases. Rather, the focus of pacifism is imagining ways to transform the world so that there are fewer exceptional cases and less violence.

The broad pacifist tradition thus offers a positive account of human flourishing in which peace is among the highest ends of human life and nonviolence is the preferred method for promoting peace, justice, equality, happiness, and the like. The philosophy of pacifism contains a rich field of problems and ideas. It has a deep history. Pacifist philosophy deserves to be taken seriously, both because it is philosophically significant to claim that “might does not make right” as pacifists will argue, and because peace is among the highest goods.

The Pacifist Tradition

One hint about the importance and complexity of pacifism is the fact that there is a wide range of important thinkers who could be described as pacifists despite their differences (Cady, “History”; Fox). In addition to Jane Addams, Albert Schweitzer, and Eglantyne Jebb—whom we mentioned above—a list of pacifists could plausibly include, among others: Jesus and the Buddha, Tertullian, Origen, Erasmus, Menno Simmons, Adin Ballou, Leo Tolstoy, Mohandas K. Gandhi, William James, Dorothy Day, Bertrand Russell, Albert Einstein, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Jr., James Lawson, Daniel Berrigan, Cesar Chavez, Thomas Merton, Thich Nhat Hanh, Desmond Tutu, Pope John Paul II, Pope Francis, the Dalai Lama, John Howard Yoder, Stanley Hauerwas, Arne Naess, Johan Galtung, and Robert Holmes—along with less scholarly types, such as John Lennon and Yoko Ono.

Some of the people named here explicitly use the term pacifism, others do not. And there are honest debates about how best to categorize some of these people—Bonhoeffer, Tertullian, and Origen, for example (Anderson; Nation et al.). Indeed, the question of whether Jesus was a pacifist is a deep and contentious question that has resulted in sectarian differences among

Christians. Christian pacifist sects include the Mennonites, Amish, Quakers, and others. This was a minority tradition. But recently, the Catholic tradition has moved closer to a pacifist position that has turned away from the idea of “just war” in order to focus on the “gospel of nonviolence” and the idea of pursuing “just peace” through the “politics of peace” (McElwee). Pope Francis has said that the only fruit of war is death: “Wars produce nothing other than cemeteries and death” (qtd. in Glatz). And he has steered the Catholic Church toward the outright rejection of the death penalty. While the Catholic Church is evolving in the direction of pacifism, pacifist commitment has long been found in a number of other traditions. The Jain tradition, Buddhism, and others in the Dharma traditions have a deep commitment to nonviolence. This is often grounded upon a metaphysical system that includes ideas about karma, transmigration of souls, and the idea that all animate beings have souls. Thus we see that there are pluralistic possibilities within the pacifist tradition; people can agree about the importance of peace and nonviolence despite different religious points of view. In calling this a “tradition,” I mean to emphasize that this is a long and historical philosophical conversation that advocates peace and criticizes violence.⁵

A broad and inclusive history of pacifism would include more substantial discussions of religious and philosophical sources for pacifism—including the difference between religious and philosophical pacifism. It would also include a discussion of differences in general among the religious (and philosophical) traditions across and around the globe. There are pacifist ideas in indigenous traditions as well as in Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic traditions (Howard; Jahanbegloo). We also see pacifism in Europe, Asia, the Americas, and Africa (Presbey). These local traditions have developed in a cosmopolitan fashion. For example, South Asian traditions helped to inform Gandhi’s philosophy of nonviolence or *ahimsa*. But Gandhi developed his ideas by building on insights found in Tolstoy’s reinterpretation of Christianity. Tolstoy himself learned from Thoreau and the American Transcendentalists. Gandhi’s synthesis of these ideas went on to influence Martin Luther King, Jr. and the American nonviolent civil rights movement. Gandhi and King have influenced others. Thus, there is a developed “global” tradition that involves a conversation between European and non-European traditions. In the European tradition, one obvious source for pacifism is found in the Christian Bible, where Jesus is presented as the “Prince of Peace” prefigured in Hebrew scripture (*New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition*, Isaiah 9:6). He establishes a new kingdom based upon a set of pacific virtues: love, forgiveness, mercy,

⁵This idea is influenced by Alasdair MacIntyre’s thinking about how traditions inform moral thinking (*Whose Justice?*).

and peace. Jesus teaches that pacifists or peacemakers are blessed and called “children of God” (Matthew 5:9). Christian pacifism has, however, struggled to maintain itself against the view that was dominant for much of the Medieval and Modern period, which focused on political power and what is called “the just war tradition.” Some interpretations of the just war tradition put it explicitly in conversation with the pacifist tradition—as an attempt to make sense of original Christian pacifism in the context of political power (Dombrowski; Ryan).

To say that there is a pacifist tradition (or traditions) is to note that there exists a global conversation about peace and nonviolence. In this conversation, pacifism is best understood as a family resemblance term that admits of substantial variation.⁶ The pacifist canon would include works by Christians and Buddhists, philosophers and theologians, activists and theorists. The claim that there is a canon or list of key texts and authors in a broad tradition of pacifism (or perhaps in several traditions of pacifism) helps to orient our thinking about the definition of pacifism. In saying that there is a pacifist tradition (or traditions) we should follow the conceptual approach often used in discussions of “the just war tradition” (Elshtain; Johnson; Lang Jr. et al.). Behind this idea is an account of how thinking and practice are historically grounded in traditions and practices that build upon the work of scholars, activists, theorists, and critics—and which reflect changing social and political reality. To say that pacifism should be understood as a tradition is to claim that pacifism is actually a long and complex conversation about the importance of peace that includes authors with various metaphysical and ethical commitments (Cortright; Johansen 143–159). To say that there is a pacifist tradition is to point out that there are a variety of ideas and commitments that are in conversation with one another (and indeed, which are also in conversation with alternatives—including the just war tradition).

Some of what I say here might be dismissed as a matter of semantics. I should admit that I am using the term “pacifism” in a very broad way: what unites this family of concepts and commitments is the claim that peace is a primary good or end-in-itself and that nonviolent means are the best means to be employed in pursuit of this good. Indeed, some friends of pacifism may not be happy with this broad usage. Robert Holmes has, for example, attempted to confine the usage of pacifism to the argument against war (*Pacifism: A Philosophy*; “Pacifism and the Concept”). But as I use the term here, the pacifist tradition is not only about war; it is also more broadly concerned

⁶Yoder explains: “Pacifism is not just one specific position, spoken for authoritatively by just one thinker. Instead, it is a wide gamut of views that vary and are sometimes even contradictory” (12).

with peace in general, in all of its various manifestations. A significant part of the conversation in the pacifist tradition has to do with the appropriate focus of theoretical analysis as well as with how this theoretical analysis ought to be put into practice. Are moral vegetarians and anti-war activists both to be understood as pacifists of sorts, for example? Can one be opposed to war but also accepting of police violence, to cite another example? And to what degree should one's commitment to peace (or opposition to war) result in concrete actions such as civil disobedience, tax resistance, and so on? All of those questions are part of the conversation in the pacifist tradition.

Critics of pacifism often insist that pacifism be defined in a simplistic way as an absolute and dogmatic rejection of all violence and war. Thus, they often argue against a straw man. But the literature on pacifism includes a wide variety of pacifisms: contingent pacifism, vocational pacifism, personal pacifism, skeptical pacifism, just war pacifism, *a priori* pacifism, *a posteriori* pacifism, conditional pacifism, political pacifism, as well as religious pacifism and absolute pacifism. This family of concepts overlaps with related terms such as nonviolence or *ahimsa*, peacemaking, peacebuilding, etc. In order to deal with the semantic and definitional question, we would have to construct a lengthy historical and empirical account of how the term has been employed in various discourses; we might also have to contrast pacifism with "pacific-ism," "nonviolentism," and other concepts. I will not pursue that effort here, although I have contributed to it in other places (Fiala, *Transformative Pacifism*). My focus here is to articulate the core of the conversation, the heart of the pacifist tradition.

Toward a Pacifist Metaphysic

Despite this complexity, it is useful to attempt to formulate a core concept that unites the varieties of pacifism and the conversations within the pacifist tradition. I stipulate here that the normative heart of pacifism is the claim that peace is an end-in-itself which ought to be pursued for its own sake. In the Christian pacifist tradition, for example, peace is often associated with God—as a source and endpoint for good things. Jesus says, for example, "Blessed are the peacemakers" (*beati pacifici*) (Matt. 5:9). And in Philippians 4:7 we read about "the peace of God (*pax Dei*), which surpasses all understanding." To cite a different tradition, we could consider Gandhi as another example. Although Gandhi was not fond of the term "pacifism," Gandhi articulates nonviolence as the core of a spiritual, ethical, and philosophical way of life—and he is generally included in the pacifist canon. Gandhi's philosophy links nonviolence to a comprehensive ethic of compassion that also includes

a theory of truth and ultimate reality.⁷ One need not accept the details of Gandhian philosophy to understand that pacifists tend to agree that peace is one of the highest goods of social, political, and individual life.

There are multiple sources for the claim that peace is the highest end and that it should be the organizing focal point for thinking about ethics and the good life. Aquinas explains that “whoever desires anything desires peace” (*Summa* IIb, q. 29, art. 2). Thus, we might say that it is peace that we pursue when we seek the satisfaction of our desires. In ancient thought, this is associated with the concept of *ataraxia*, which is translated as serenity or tranquility—but which is more literally rendered as non-disturbance. In Buddhist and South Asian sources, the concept of *ahimsa* or nonviolence is related. And, as it is often put, this tradition seeks “inner peace” or “peace of mind.” In Chinese philosophy this is related to ideas such as *wu wei* (non-action) and to *ping* or *heping* (peace, harmony or balance). In all of this there is room for struggle, conflict, and creative conflict resolution. But the goal is not struggle for its own sake. Rather, the pacifist tradition sees struggle and conflict as being resolved into peace. Furthermore, the idea of peaceful resolution does not mean that there is a simplistic reduction of diversity into unity. Rather, the pacifist tradition tends to see peace as a harmonious interplay of diverse forces, which retain their vitality and identity despite harmonious coordination.

Other normative traditions will focus on justice as coordination of the parts. Some will emphasize liberty, diversity and individuality. Pacifism includes justice, liberty, and other values. But it organizes and conceives these values within a framework that emphasizes peaceful, nonviolent, and harmonious coordination. Of course, in all of this, there is an open question about what counts as “peace.” It turns out that peace is one of those concepts (like “time,” “self,” “God,” etc.) that is not easily defined and which inevitably prompts further reflection. The pacifist traditions are engaged in that type of reflection. Furthermore, peace is often best understood dialectically: peace is the opposite of war, nonviolence is the opposite of violence. Such definitions are also invitations for further reflection, since concepts like war and violence are also complex. In order to understand this complexity, further analysis has been offered by peace theorists such as Johan Galtung, who has directed our attention to the distinction between negative and positive peace and who has analyzed violence in various ways: as direct, structural, cultural, and so on. Despite this complexity the pacifist traditions assert that peace is the highest

⁷Gandhi explains, for example, that “a perfect vision of Truth can only follow a complete realization of Ahimsa. To see the universal and all-pervading Spirit of Truth face to face one must be able to love the meanest of creation as oneself” (*Autobiography* 615).

good and central focal point of concern. And thus we can see that pacifist traditions are provocations or invitations for further thought.

This focus on peace as a primary good is found even in the work of philosophers who are often left outside of the typical pacifist canon. Aristotle, for example, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, includes peace among the highest ends of human life—a thing we value for its own sake.⁸ He suggests that in peaceful contemplation we are most like the gods—complete, self-sufficient, and happy. Augustine also focuses our attention on peace as the ideal order or structure of all things.⁹ Peace is ontological for Augustine insofar as it is the telos of moral and political structures. We ought to organize the world in accord with this telos or end.

Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas do allow for the use of violence in rare circumstances. Augustine is one of the early proponents of just war theory. His ideas influenced Aquinas, who explained, quoting Augustine: “We do not seek peace in order to be at war, but we go to war that we may have peace” (qtd. in *Summa* IIb q. 40, art. 1). But to say that violence can be justified as a limited means in response to aggression is not to reject the idea that peace is an end-in-itself. On this interpretation, the just war tradition is merely an outgrowth of pacifism—an ethic for emergencies, intended to help preserve peace. Understanding justifications of violence as exceptions or emergencies helps us keep our eye on the primary good, which is peace.

A healthcare metaphor may help to explain how pacifists will view the justification of violence. Health is the normal and natural condition of bodies. Medical interventions may help to restore health. But the focal point of a philosophy of health should not be on those rare emergencies that require intervention. And it would be preferable to find holistic, non-invasive, and

⁸Aristotle explains the activity of contemplation as follows: “Also the activity of contemplation may be held to be the only activity that is loved for its own sake: it produces no result beyond the actual act of contemplation, whereas from practical pursuits we look to secure some advantage, greater or smaller, beyond the action itself. Also happiness is thought to involve leisure; for we do business in order that we may have leisure, and carry on war in order that we may have peace” (*Nic. Eth.* 1177b).

⁹Augustine writes: “The peace of the body then consists in the duly proportioned arrangement of its parts. The peace of the irrational soul is the harmonious repose of the appetites, and that of the rational soul the harmony of knowledge and action. The peace of body and soul is the well-ordered and harmonious life and health of the living creature. Peace between man and God is the well-ordered obedience of faith to eternal law. Peace between man and man is well-ordered concord. Domestic peace is the well-ordered concord between those of the family who rule and those who obey. Civil peace is a similar concord among the citizens. The peace of the celestial city is the perfectly ordered and harmonious enjoyment of God, and of one another in God. The peace of all things is the tranquility of order” (*City of God* Bk. 19, Ch. 13).

thus nonviolent medical interventions that are effective. And indeed, we ought to focus on cultivating health and preventing the need for such interventions. The analogy with peace is as follows. Peace is the natural and normal state. Justified violence might occur when an emergency arises. But the focal point ought to be on finding less violent or nonviolent alternatives and in building peace through preventive work.

With this in mind, we might offer a pacifist interpretation of the Augustinian and Thomistic just war tradition. To say that we only go to war in order to promote peace means that peace is the higher good. It also implies that it would be preferable to create peace in other ways. Peace is the healthy condition, the normal condition, the condition of wholeness and completion. The justification of violence represents a disease or a malfunction. Our efforts ought to focus on imagining ways to prevent that malfunction and on finding nonviolent ways to heal the disease of violence.

Another indication of the importance of peace is found in the heart of modern liberal-democratic political philosophy, which, in Hobbes's words, views the social contract as "articles of peace" (*Leviathan*, ch. 13, par. 14). Indeed, Hobbes suggests that the first "law of nature" is "to seek peace, and follow it" (*Leviathan* ch. 14, par. 4).¹⁰ Modern liberal-democratic societies seek to establish "domestic tranquility" by pacifying social conflict. Some violence may be permitted as a means employed by the state to establish social peace. But the primary end of political life is not police violence. Rather, peace is the primary good and police are often called "peace officers." A pacifist reinterpretation of the Hobbesian social contract and the idea of police power ought to emphasize the importance of nonviolent methods (crime prevention, restorative justice, mental health work, and education) that provide alternatives to the need for violent policing. Foremost among these nonviolent alternatives is the social contract itself and the system of democratic representation that helps to build social cohesion while defusing social conflict.

The pacifist idea that peace represents the completion of human endeavor is metaphysical. It stipulates a claim about the highest good. To see this, consider the opposed thinking of those who, like Heraclitus or Nietzsche, think that the universe is structured by violence, power, domination, and brutality. Pacifist philosophy sees the human universe differently. Christianity postulates a God who loves the world and his creation and who wants it to be at peace. Non-theists can understand that peace is the condition of wholeness found

¹⁰Hobbes is often viewed as a defender of a view similar to the position of Heraclitus, mentioned below, and he is often thrown into the camp of the realists. It is true that Hobbes does see us as competitive, diffident, and liable to violence and war. But Hobbes's aim is to overcome that. His aspiration and moral ideal is peace.

when self and community are integrated and in harmony. This peaceful state of completion is the ultimate focal point of pacifist metaphysics.

Other ends are imaginable: happiness or justice, for example. Different moral and political theories will focus on these different ends. Pacifists can be open to pluralism and the idea that peace is merely one among the primary goods. But the basic commitments of pacifism revolve around an account of human flourishing that holds that humans flourish in conditions of peace and that the highest end for human life is peace.

The Straw Man Objection to Pacifism

Pacifism has often been dismissed as a merely negative and very narrow idea.¹¹ It is often construed as simplistically declaring absolute opposition to violence or war. The negative construal of pacifism creates a straw man that is easily toppled by examples that are often variations of the Trolley Problem: if the pacifist is not willing to kill one in order to save a larger number, then pacifism is viewed as absurd and is easily rejected.

But as explained above, pacifism is not simply a declaration of opposition to war or violence. The straw man argument against pacifism often holds that pacifism is a utopian absolutism that is not willing to confront the challenges of the real world and non-ideal theorizing. But, as explained above, pacifism is a living tradition that includes extensive reflection on the real world, including the question of what to do in non-ideal situations. As an example, we might consider Bertrand Russell, who described his own position as “relative, political pacifism.” He explained: “very few wars are worth fighting” (8). He opposed the First World War but reluctantly supported the Second World War. He was deeply opposed to nuclear weapons. Russell’s pacifism thus developed in conversation with the real world. The circumstances and situations matter for pacifists such as Russell. Anti-nuclear pacifism is going to be quite different from the pacifism of the early Christian church. And so on.

That kind of diversity of opinion and responsiveness to the real world helps the pacifist tradition avoid the straw man arguments used against it. Indeed, several typical objections to pacifism can be conceived as variations of this straw man argument. For example, critics argue as follows.¹²

1. Peace and nonviolence only make sense in an ideal world where there is no war or criminal aggression and in which people are persuaded by arguments and acts of conscience.

¹¹Among critics of pacifism we should note Churchill, Jensen, Regan, a series of articles by Narveson, and defenders of the just war tradition such as Walzer.

¹²These objections are a summary of what I explain in more detail in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on “Pacifism.”

2. Pacifism is inconsistent and incoherent since it claims to value life but refuses to do what is necessary to defend life.
3. Pacifism is immoral when it ignores the real world need to respond to violence with violence and when it thus “allows” innocents to be killed.
4. Pacifism and the demand for nonviolence are defended from within a bubble of privilege that ignores the groans of the oppressed, the demand for revolution, and the violence that undergirds the status quo.

These objections remind us of the need for careful and self-critical pacifist theory and practice. But these objections are only decisive when pacifism is viewed in an absolutist and monistic way. Furthermore, pacifism must not be confused with passive-ism. Activists like Gandhi and King have worked to develop a repertoire of nonviolent strategic action that does not simply acquiesce to evil.¹³

Pacifists understand that there is remaining violence in the “real world.” Pacifists want to eliminate this violence, preferably by nonviolent means. The question of whether violent means can be employed in exceptional circumstances (which is the heart of these objections) is a smaller question in comparison with the overarching idea that we ought to work to build a peaceful world and that the means employed in this effort should primarily and for the most part be nonviolent. The question of the relation between means and ends thus asks us to consider pacifism in the context of moral theory.

Pacifism and Moral Theory

In addition to stipulating that peace is good, pacifism also advances an account of appropriate means; nonviolent means ought to be employed in order to bring about peace. Pacifism usually aims to establish basic coherence between means and ends. Pacifism is interested in the morality of the act (the means employed) and the morality of the consequences (the end). It is also interested in the motives/intentions of those who act, as well as the habits and disposition of agents. And it articulates a set of virtues and an ideal of human flourishing. Pacifism is thus a comprehensive moral theory. But, as indicated above, it is not easy to unite means and ends in a complex world that includes injustice, residual violence, and other forms of aggression. In what follows

¹³Gene Sharp, for example, identified nearly 200 nonviolent techniques ranging across a number of general categories, including: nonviolent protest and persuasion, social non-cooperation, economic non-cooperation, political non-cooperation, and active nonviolent interventions (Albert Einstein Institution).

here, I outline ways in which pacifism can be understood in connection with other normative theories. I have argued elsewhere that pacifism can in fact be understood as a unique normative theory in its own right (*Transformative*). What is unique about pacifism is that it aspires to unify means and ends. It can thus be understood in both consequentialist and deontological terms—and it also has a connection with virtue theory. In what follows here I argue for the importance of pacifism as a moral theory by showing how pacifism is connected with the other main versions of moral theory.

Utilitarianism

Utilitarians typically focus on maximizing the greatest happiness for the greatest number. I indicated above that happiness can be understood in terms of peace, which is connected with the satisfaction of desire. Thus a pacifist utilitarianism can be understood as seeking to create the most peace for the most people. However, in its focus on the coherence of means and ends, pacifism is unlike utilitarianism and other forms of consequentialism, which divorce means and ends. Utilitarianism often seems to allow that “the end justifies the means.” In considering whether it would be permissible to kill one person in order to help a number of others—in the Trolley Problem and its variations—utilitarians typically ignore the morality of means (the ethical evaluation of the act) in order to bring about the best outcome.¹⁴ Utilitarians will also tend to ignore the intentions of agents; so long as good consequences are optimized, intentions are irrelevant. The questions raised by Trolley Problem scenarios are interesting. But for pacifists, it is more important to criticize structures of violence and to find ways to make the world a more peaceful place in general, i.e., a place in which there are fewer Trolley Problem scenarios.

Utilitarians would undoubtedly agree with pacifists that nonviolent or less lethal means are preferred if they are effective in minimize suffering over all. There can be a basically utilitarian justification of consequentialist or contingent pacifism (Fiala “Contingent”; May; Morrow). But note that

¹⁴See for example Thomson’s “Turning the Trolley.” I discuss this and other examples in “Pacifism and The Trolley Problem.” Variations on the idea of diverting the trolley include: pushing a heavy man off a bridge and onto the tracks or blowing up a heavy man who is stuck in the cave in front of a group of spelunkers. There are other variations including far out forms of the question of whether the numbers count (Taurek). The version of the Trolley Problem that is often raised for pacifism might be called the “Hitler Problem.” Is it permissible to kill one person (Hitler, for example) in order to preserve peace? Or broadening this a bit, is it permissible to wage a limited war in order to bring about a lasting peace? Those sorts of objections are usually offered from a consequentialist vantage point.

utilitarian or consequentialist pacifism would not be absolutist. Consequentialists cannot rule out violence *per se*, since it is the outcome that matters and not the intrinsic value of the act.

A consequentialist formulation of pacifism might begin from empirical and historical analyses that conclude that violence tends to beget further violence. Or one might point out that war is unpredictable and that it often causes a proliferation in violence. One could develop a pacifist interpretation of just war doctrine out of a narrow focus on the proportionality constraint. Some forms of so-called “just war pacifism” do this.¹⁵ But consequentialist pacifism depends upon empirical considerations. It is not always true that limited violence produces worse outcomes. It is possible, for example, that if Hitler were assassinated in the early 1930s, the world would have been a better place. But the case for consequentialist pacifism grows stronger as we move from targeted assassination up to total war and nuclear weapon. Each moment of escalation comes with increased risk.

Critics of consequentialism will note the apparent coldness and crassness of “ends justify the means” reasoning. This often leads utilitarians to bring in side-constraints or to move from act-utilitarianism to rule-utilitarianism. This opens to the door to a broader set of considerations. This move to the broader vantage point is typical of pacifism. Pacifism aims at a broader set of considerations than whether we could justify the assassination of Hitler. The world does not generally consist of such stark and isolated moral dilemmas. Pacifism offers a broader and deeper point of view, which asks us to re-evaluate cultural norms, psychological dispositions, social relations, economic institutions, and the structures of political life. Pacifists are also interested in criticizing the historical circumstances that led to Hitler—including the deep prehistory of the Third Reich in imperial ambitions, the First World War, and the general background of European anti-Semitism. This must include a discussion of how war and violence structured European history for centuries. It is thus not enough to contemplate the assassination Hitler. Rather, we must imagine transforming the world so that there are no more Hitlers. And that is why pacifists are more interested in criticizing militarism than they are in quibbling about Trolley Problems. The bigger moral questions are left unanswered when we get railroaded by the Trolley Problem.

Utilitarians will also be interested in those sorts of critical and transformative social and political questions. In order to bring about the greatest

¹⁵One version of this idea is developed from reflection on the morality of nuclear war. Nuclear war would exceed the limits of proportionality. It would also violate the *in bello* principle of discrimination. But that principle is not a consequentialist concern; discrimination is a deontological prohibition. On “just war pacifism” and discrimination/proportionality see my study, *The Just War Myth*.

happiness for the greatest number of people, we might have to radically criticize and transform social conditions. Indeed, the utilitarians of the nineteenth century were radicals and visionaries.¹⁶ Yes, we might kill one in order to save five others. But the point of utilitarianism—and of pacifism—is not to dwell on such exceptional cases. Rather, the point of moral theory is to open to the door to the radical improvement of society.

Deontology

In the Trolley Problem and its variations, an innocent individual might end up sacrificed for the well-being of the larger social group. The Hitler example points in a different direction: toward the justification of killing an evil person who is responsible for atrocity. The distinction between innocence and guilt seems to point us beyond a mere focus on consequences. Justifications of violence typically hold that the innocent should not be deliberately targeted but that guilty people (or “combatants,” as articulated in just war theory) can be deliberately killed. This focus moves us away from consequences toward deontological considerations.

One important idea here is that innocent human beings should not be used as mere means. This idea is familiar from Kantian deontology. We also find respect for persons in human rights theory and in natural law. There are versions of pacifism that concur with these non-consequentialist concerns. When absolute pacifists declare that one must never deliberately kill anyone, they make a non-consequentialist or deontological stipulation about the intrinsic value of all human life. A less restrictive idea holds that one must never deliberately kill an innocent person—which can be used as a critique of permissive applications of the principle of discrimination in just war theory. Much more needs to be said, but in general these forms of pacifism focus on the morality of the act (or the means).¹⁷

Kant’s deontological moral theory is linked to his interest in finding a way to eliminate war and create “perpetual peace” by way of a league of

¹⁶In support of their wide-ranging interests, if not always their pacifism, we recall that Bentham thought that animal welfare mattered. He argued in favor of abolishing the death penalty and legalizing prostitution. He developed the theory of the panopticon and imagined constructing a machine that could mete out corporal punishment. John Stuart Mill argued in defense of women’s equality. He also defended colonial intervention in the name of spreading happiness. And he was in favor of a form of socialism.

¹⁷A fuller discussion would need more detail about innocence and guilt (or liability to being killed in discussions of what counts as a “combatant”). We would also need to consider issues such as the doctrine of double effect, which permits foreseen but unintended collateral damage. Note that the doctrine of double effect is a non-consequentialist consideration, since it focuses on intentions as much as outcomes (Fiala, *Just War*).

nations or what he called a “federation of peace” (Fox; Kant). Kant suggests that one of the problems with using war to advance “right” is that this seems to make it appear that what is right is determined merely by force—which is the irrational idea that might makes right. But Kant finds it necessary to outline some limitations on war that are familiar from the just war tradition. This leads to confusion about Kant’s view of pacifism. Although some argue that Kant is a pacifist, Brian Orend has challenged their interpretations and connected Kant’s thinking to the just war tradition. At any rate, Kant’s primary focus in terms of morality is not peace or pacifism per se. Rather, in his moral theory he is focused on the formal structure of morality. Pacifism as a moral theory offers more content, focusing not only on the logical structure of morality but also on peace as a primary good. This focus does not show up in Kant’s articulation of his theory of morality.

So unlike Kantian deontology, which is grounded in the abstract formalism of the categorical imperative, pacifism gives content to these formulations. While Kant says, “do your duty,” the pacifist declares it is your duty to pursue peace. While Kant says, “respect persons as ends-in-themselves,” the pacifist adds that the pacific virtues—love, kindness, generosity, mercy, etc.—demonstrate respect for persons. While Kant says that we cannot use a person as a means, pacifism says that nonviolent means are preferred and that violent means are *prima facie* immoral. While Kant says that we ought to aim to bring about “the kingdom of ends,” the pacifist says that we ought to aim at creating what Stanley Hauerwas has called “the peaceable kingdom.” It is likely that the Kantian Kingdom of Ends would be a peaceable kingdom. But it remains an open question as to the extent to which Kant’s theory itself can be described as a pacifist theory.

Pacifism, as a deontological theory, can be subjected to some of the sorts of objections that are often offered against Kant. The most famous problem is the question of whether it is possible on Kant’s theory to lie in order to bring about some good consequence—for example, lying to a Nazi in order to defend the Jews hiding in the attic. If pacifism is viewed as a deontological theory that rests upon an absolute prohibition on killing, then pacifism is subject to this problem, as we have already discussed above. A consequentialist pacifist might respond by saying that the ends matter as much as the means. Thus, there is nothing wrong with lying in order to save Jews from the Nazis. Things get more complicated when we get to the question of whether it would be permissible to firebomb German civilians in order to defeat Nazism. At some point, the numbers do matter, and only an absolute deontologist will deny this.

And yet, by emphasizing the importance of means, acts, and intentions, the deontological perspective gives us pause. Assassination and firebombing are often rationalized in ways that exceeds proper limits. And we might

wonder whether our intentions are morally appropriate. War and violence often include a variety of mixed motives: racism, ethnocentrism, the lust for power, the hope for the spoils of war, as well as hatred and bloodlust. The considerations of deontological ethics leave us with a sense of dis-ease that pushes us in the direction of psychological, social, and political critique. The narrow focus of the question of lying to the Nazi in order to save the Jews in the attic leads to a broader critique of anti-Semitism and the social and political failures that leaves us with this forced choice. Again, pacifists are interested in this broader critique of structural violence and imagining ways to transform the world and change those structures.

Virtue

Pacifists are also often committed to a set of virtues: love, kindness, generosity, hospitality, mercy, and forgiveness. Pacifists believe that the pacific virtues are linked to a good human life. Human flourishing occurs when people and institutions (families, businesses, and polities) are kind, loving, hospitable, and so on. Pacifists have also been engaged in educational efforts to create such virtues. Training in nonviolence often includes both strategic considerations and a focus on developing the inner strength to remain committed to nonviolence even in the face of callous disregard and aggressive retaliation.

When pacifism is conceived as a form of virtue ethics, it is easy to understand how it links to transformative social critique. Virtue ethics is typically very interested in educational and cultural/social reform efforts. If we want to cultivate pacific virtues we must take up the question of moral education and character formation. Pacifists have often worked to create a better world through educational projects, psychological work, and political practice. Pacifism's effort to unify means and ends reminds us of the need for careful and consistent social and psychological critique. Thus, the pacific virtues are connected to a variety of efforts aimed at building and maintaining peace: caring for the weak and needy, creating robust communities, resolving and de-escalating conflict, and transforming negative (violent and unjust) cultural, economic, social, and political structures and practices.

Critical and Transformative Social Theory

We can see now that pacifism should be understood as a critical and transformative social theory. Despite substantial variation within the pacifist tradition, pacifists generally ask us to evaluate ends, means, and virtues—including habits, education, culture, and institutions—from the vantage point of peace. As a critical and transformative theory, pacifism can be understood on analogy with feminism and other critical social theories: it aims to understand peace

and impediments to peace, as well as the interconnected sets of concepts, practices, and institutions that are related to peace (and its absence).

The positive work of pacifism is grounded in a robust and comprehensive idea of peace (and its absence), which has become the focus of an entire field of study. Peace studies, as articulated by Galtung and other peace theorists, has delved into the difference between negative and positive peace, as well as to concepts such as cultural violence and structural violence (Galtung, “Cultural” and “Violence”). It is obvious that pacifists are generally *opposed* to violence (including cultural, structural, and direct violence). But it is often forgotten that pacifists are also focused on the difficult project of *building* positive peace. This focus extends across a wide range of topics: from family relations and the economy, to ecology, the arts, religion, and politics.

Pacifism is thus not merely a negative rejection of war or violence; it also offers a positive theory of human flourishing. And pacifism need not be formulated in absolute terms. Indeed, as a theory of social change, it will often be limited and incremental; minimizing violence is important in a world that contains violence. Absolutism is indeed a problem in ethical and political theory. When absolute pacifism is rejected as absurd, this criticism is best understood as a rejection of absolutism (and not as a rejection of pacifism). Pacifism, when it is understood as a comprehensive and critical theory of social life, cannot be viewed as an absolute dogma that simply rejects violent means. Instead it offers a dialectical theory of peace (and of violence) that asks us to critically evaluate structures of violence, while working on the difficult project of peaceful transformation.

Pacifist commitment to nonviolence opens the door toward what we might call a “transformative epistemology” (Russon). When one adopts the point of view of pacifism, the world appears differently, and the self is changed. One begins to see structures of violence differently and one begins to behave differently in light of this new way of seeing. Such a transformation also occurs when we adopt the vantage point of other critical social and political theories. Consider feminism. Male dominance was once widely considered normal and natural. But through the critical vantage of feminism, sexism becomes visible. Feminism shows us sexism manifesting itself in many ways in diverse places. Once we become feminists, or adopt the feminist vantage point, we see sexism in the economy, in political structures, in family life, in academia, in morality, religion, and in philosophy itself. Pacifism is like feminism to the extent that when we take up the pacifist vantage point, we learn to see the dominance of militarism, structural violence, and cultural violence. We also become critical of the typical theories of the justification of violence.

The mainstream of our culture often gives unreflective support to militarism. In a world of military force, violence seems normal, necessary, and

even heroic. Pacifists criticize militaristic ideology, as well as structural and institutional violence and the cultural matrix in which violence appears normal, necessary, and heroic. Pacifism does not take violence and war for granted. Instead, it steps outside of the accepted structures and justifications of violence—what I have called elsewhere the “myths” of violence and war. The myth of the just war blinds us when it prevents us from thinking critically about violence and war. Pacifism points out our general “peace blindness”: our inability to see violence, our tendency to rationalize violence, and the usual dismissal of peace and pacifism as weak or absurd. The critical vantage point of pacifism ranges widely and deeply. It encourages us to see how we valorize violence in multiple ways: in ideas about masculinity and gender, in assumptions of economics and religion, in the way we organize families and our economy, and in our social and political institutions.

Peace blindness is cured by seeing through violent ideology and by recognizing the importance of peace as a normative first principle. Pacifism is thus much larger and more comprehensive than the just war theory. Just war theory offers a narrowly focused account of how and when war can be justified. But just war theory cannot offer a critique of the military-industrial complex. It is not concerned with economics, bureaucracy, political theory, or psychology. Just war theory does not tell us how to avoid war. It does not criticize the myths of warrior culture. Nor can it be used to explain the psychological problems that afflict soldiers, including alcoholism, domestic violence, PTSD, and moral injury (Fiala, “Moral Injury”). And the just war theory certainly does not extend toward a critique of domestic violence, police brutality, cruelty toward animals, and other forms of violence.

Just war theory is limited to the question of when violence can be justified as an exception. It is not focused on violence prevention or peace-building. But that is the focus of pacifists and nonviolentists who want to transform the conditions that give rise to violence and war. This helps us to situate Duane Cady’s critique of “warism” or what others call “militarism” or the “military-industrial complex” (Cady, *From Warism* and “Warism”; Gay). These ideologies organize our thinking, our economy, and our social and political lives. These constructs are often simply taken for granted. But they create significant impediments to building a culture of peace. Pacifism directs our attention to these impediments, seeking to transform them in nonviolent ways.

The Philosophical Critique of Violence

Pacifism provides a critique of violence that moves beyond the narrow discourses of justification that are found in the just war tradition. This critique is based upon assumptions that most philosophers hold dear—even those

who do not explicitly affirm pacifism. The most important philosophical commitment of pacifism is the idea that “might does not make right.” Violence does not create justice or peace. Violence may eliminate a threat or kill an enemy—but it does not convert, persuade, or educate. Violence operates at the level of brute force. But it does not have spiritual, cultural, moral, or intellectual power. The good guy does not always win. Violence is physical power, so superiority in the realm of violence is primarily a feature of the natural (i.e., amoral) world. Physical strength is often a matter of the genetic lottery. It does not indicate moral superiority. And good luck in battle has nothing to do with moral justification. Victory in war depends on factors such as economic supremacy, geographic good fortune, good weather, and so on. In the old days, I suppose, it was common to think that if your nation won in battle, God must have been on your side. But that view is morally and theologically problematic. Furthermore, it is not clear that victory and military superiority actually result in moral progress. Often, the winners vaunt their prowess, subjecting the losers to humiliation and forms of “victor’s justice.” Resentments linger. Victory can thus stimulate rebellion, which stimulates violent reprisals, and so on. These sorts of considerations are usually off the table in discussions of the justification of violence. But philosophers have noted—since the time of Socrates—that the realm of philosophical thought is different from the realm of physical force. And we have usually preferred to persuade our enemies than to attack them because we know that might does not make right.

Conclusion

Violence and war will likely always be with us. But the basic goods of life are also always with us. These are the goods of peace: love, tranquility, harmony, community, and the like. Pacifism seeks to develop these goods. The goal of pacifism is not merely to criticize violence. Nor does it concern itself with the justification of violence—as in the just war tradition. Rather, the pacifist tradition aims to transform the world in a way that prevents, avoids, and minimizes violence. This is not, however, primarily a negative critique of violence leading to only to “negative peace.” Rather, the goal is to build positive peace. One way that the pacifist tradition does this is by critiquing violence. However, the goal is to help us overcome peace blindness. This in turn helps us imagine—in clear-sighted and systematic ways—the peaceful future we want to create. Finally, the pacifist tradition teaches that we must try to unify means and ends. If we seek peace, we should pursue it nonviolently. In a violent world, this is not always easy, nor is it obvious. But things of value are not always easy or obvious. The philosophy of peace—and philosophical

pacifism—should not shy away from the difficult questions or fall into empty slogans. But it should also not be afraid to use a term like “pacifism,” which has a rich heritage, and which is an invitation to further thought.

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Andrew Fiala

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