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Guns and Practical Reason: An Ethical Exploration of Guns and Language

Mark Ryan

THERE IS NO SHORTAGE OF WORDS AND RHETORIC being offered up in relation to the topic of guns, much of it directed to the political standoff regarding how to respond to gun violence.[1] Yet the debate over guns in America, especially as it concerns putting in conversation the positions of "gun people" and "non-gun people,"[2] barely scratches the surface of substantive convictions held on both sides about the place of guns in our lives. A critical reason for this is that the language and rhetoric of the debate suppresses such convictions, keeping the discussion shallow and antagonistic. This, I argue, is in part due to the inadequate ethical conceptions—conceptions of practical reason—that frame the debate.

A richer discussion between gun and non-gun persons might be modeled by contrasting two conceptions of practical reason. One of these conceptions is characterized by the insistence that the relation of means to ends can only be instrumental, such that the "means" we take up in pursuit of our ends are indifferent to the ends themselves. In so doing, it overlooks the rootedness of practical reason in social practices. The other conception views at least some means as constitutive of the ends themselves. It further recognizes the integral relationship between practical reason and social practices. I borrow terms used by Charles Taylor in an essay titled, "Explanation and Practical Reason," to elaborate this distinction between two ways of conceiving practical reason.

One can bring out the way guns only make sense to us within social practices by examining their character as artefacts or instruments that

[1] President Biden recently called gun violence in America an "epidemic," taking advantage of a metaphor made apropos current events ("Remarks by President Biden on Gun Violence Prevention," The White House, April 8, 2021, www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/04/08/remarks-by-president-biden-on-gun-violence-prevention/).

[2] I elect for these terms rather than the more common "pro-gun" and "pro-control" or "anti-gun" for reasons I hope will become clear in the course of my paper. In short, while the typical terms fit a conception of the gun debate as the attempt to gain ground in a zero-sum political game, the latter captures better the way guns are bound up with deeper moral convictions.

mediate our relationship to our environs. Drawing on Matthew Crawford's work on tools and their place in social practices, I illuminate how guns as mechanical instruments help shape a world of experience first of all for gun people, and secondarily, in ways both contrasting and complementary, for non-gun people.

Both Crawford's theorizing about human awareness mediated by instruments and Taylor's about different conceptions of practical reason are employed in this essay to reflect upon examples drawn from my own experience of guns in the context of my relationship with a brother-in-law, "Joe." Joe is a committed gun person, while I am a quintessential non-gun person. We are thus examples of two different "life worlds" with respect to guns. The encounter with Joe provided an opportunity to dig beneath the superficiality of the popular terms of America's gun debate, and I use this ethnographic approach in the service of greater ethical clarity.

As data, my conversations with Joe can be correlated with sociological work on the nature of public debate about guns in American life, works buttressing my claim that American gun debates are morally shallow, when not positively distortive in nature. These conversations also help us see that a problematic conception of practical reason funds the muteness about substantive convictions in popular gun discourse.[3] Furthermore, what I argue to be a superior conception of practical reasoning to the one I believe more typically frames the discussion, and which Taylor calls "*ad hominem*" practical reasoning, shows why and how a personal encounter with guns and interpersonal dialogue flowing from such an encounter has legitimacy in an ethical evaluation of guns, especially when the ultimate purpose is to indicate how a shallow debate about guns might be deepened.

After an opening discussion of the paper's orientation as an exploration in moral psychology, there follows a brief presentation of sociological evidence for the claim that gun discourse in America is impoverished and a deeper look at Charles Taylor's two conceptions of practical reason. I next move on to present two examples drawn from my encounters and subsequent discussions with "Joe" about guns, examining these in light of Taylor's and Matthew Crawford's theories. I finally deepen the exploration of ethics in relation to language by turning briefly to Rowan Williams's theory of language and art. Williams's theory complements the discussion of practical reason in relation to language that has gone before and sheds light especially on the problem of how to move forward into a language supportive of richer

[3] For example, on the role of narratives crafted to attach blame and identify heroes in the gun debate within social media, see Melissa Merry, "Constructing Policy Narratives in 140 Characters or Less: The Case of Gun Policy Organizations," *The Policy Studies Journal* 44, no. 4 (2016): 373–395.

dialogue. At the same time, Williams's work discloses a theological backdrop to the issues of language within the gun debate.

GUNS, LANGUAGE, AND MORAL PSYCHOLOGY

We have truncated our ethical discussions of guns in America for reasons that are morally significant. The character of our language about guns both suppresses much of what might be said about the significances guns have for us and gives rise to distorted speech about how guns figure in our lives. While this paper focuses on diagnosing the causes of this impoverishment, in doing so it points toward a way of enriching our talk about guns.

"Guns don't kill people; people kill people," is currently a slogan employed by advocates of gun rights in order to deflect attention from the prominence of guns in the mass shootings whose frequency numbs us to the loss of life. Yet it also reflects a presupposition that underlies both sides of the debate over guns as popularly conceived: our tools and other technologies do not possess goodness or badness in themselves; it all depends on how someone uses them.

The belief that guns in themselves must be morally neutral, I claim, rests on a moral psychology and concomitant account of practical reason, the deliberation toward bringing about a human good through action. This moral psychology, in turn, funds the impoverishment of the language we use to speak of guns' significance in our lives. According to this psychology, an interior, non-bodily, capacity, such as the solitary "will" of the existentialists, is related to the body as to a tool through which it realizes its ends.

This picture of the human agent underwrites a complementary conception of the agent's practical reasoning. Just as the body becomes passive, neutral, so, with regard to practical reason, all "means" are morally indifferent to the ends sought. This psychology makes credible the claim that guns are "mere means" and that guns as such can bear no moral scrutiny at all. Indeed, it is related to a whole way of thinking often called "instrumentalism." Theologian Brad Kallenberg locates instrumentalism, together with reductionism and standardization, among the effects of "technopoly," or the ascendancy of technology in our culture.[4] He defines instrumentalism as the claim that no physical artifact has inherent moral or political properties. The only thing that can make an artifact good or bad is the use to which it is put. This implies that we should be able to make moral judgments about our actions and activities with no attention to the tools and other technologies so routinely used within them.[5]

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[4] For a helpful discussion of instrumentalism, see Brad Kallenberg, *God and Gadgets: Following Jesus in a Technological Age* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 15–20.

[5] For a compatible concept to instrumentalism or technopoly, consider Pope Francis's "technocratic paradigm," (*Laudato Si'*, no. 106).

Instrumentalism can only evaluate the means to an end as effective or ineffective. We are thus limited in what we can say about means to such adjectives as "efficient" or "inefficient." Yet as integral to the actions we perform to bring about certain ends, tools such as guns begin to enter into how we see the ends themselves. Eventually, it is through our most commonly adopted means that we come to understand the ends we seek. Recognizing that means may be inseparable from the good we seek to bring about implies that we can and should say more about them. They are worthy subjects of moral discourse and imagination, and the failure to see how some means deeply inform how we conceive our ends results in a kind of moral inarticulacy. It results in an impoverished form of speech.

A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE LANGUAGE OF THE GUN DEBATE IN AMERICA

The debate about guns in our society suffers from linguistic impoverishment. Lisa Fisher provides a historical and sociological perspective on this impoverishment. [6] She argues that our public debate has features designed to emphasize the divide between opposites at the extremes, while at the same time overshadowing any common ground within Americans' convictions regarding a reasonable place for guns to occupy in our way of life. These fully articulate positions at the extremes are highly refined rhetorically to promote their aims. The scripts employed reflect a simplified and essentialized message, boiled down to strategic talking points.[7] They employ a rhetoric of hostility, indeed of war, as each side proclaims itself to be "under siege" by their opponents. They are constructed, in other words, to win ground in an arena of power politics. In this mechanistic vision of public debate and politics, the only virtue is effectiveness in vanquishing one's opponents. Thus, the form of the debate sustains the strictly divided positions, making the ideas of open exchange and transformation unthinkable.

It is not hard to see that by participation in such gun discourse one naturally adopts a form of practical reasoning akin to what Charles Taylor calls "apodictic." Skill in reasoning is measured by one's ability to marshal appropriate means to achieve a goal that is "given," which is to say not itself material for reflection. It is hardly the sort of practical deliberation where truth or wisdom is thought to reside beyond any one individual's grasp, thus necessitating genuine dialogue,

[6] Lisa Fisher, "The Social Construction of Polarization in the Discourse of Gun Rights vs. Gun Control," in *Understanding America's Gun Culture*, ed. Craig Hovey and Lisa Fisher (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018), 1–30.
[7] Fisher, "The Social Construction," 1.

or common deliberation.[8] Noting how scholars themselves have become implicated in a dynamic that naturalizes polarization, Fisher recommends the undertaking of studies that would,

> examine the language and meaning construction employed on both sides of the debate to understand more about how it is that areas of agreement are downplayed and areas of disagreement are emphasized, as these social processes lend to continued perceptions of divisiveness and detract from the ability of those on both sides of the issue to engage in meaningful dialogue about guns in American society.[9]

My own approach seeks this goal by critically attending to the conceptions of practical reasoning underlying our discourse about guns.

My use of ethnography to illustrate the distinctions between forms of practical reasoning aims to address key features of the gun discourse identified by Fisher. The polarized discourse Fisher describes presents the other side as an enemy to be vanquished. Each side envisions its opposite as a one-dimensional subject, incapable of nuance or sympathy with those with whom it finds itself in conflict. The flip side of this flattened view of one's opponent is the perhaps uneasy feeling that one's own agency has been reduced to choosing strategic means of realizing one's own, already fully evident, desires. As a result, one's own self becomes less porous to genuine encounter with the other and less able to experience the kind of self-transformation such encounter may bring.

The ethnographic experience I present seeks to re-open this closed discourse by embodying a different kind of conversation in a few, related respects. First, given the extended family connections that link Joe to me, it can be fairly said that we both had a stake in the conversation's quality. As we met and discussed guns in his home, the common good of the family surrounded our dialogue. This contrasts to the zero-sum politics noted above.

Second, the thick description characteristic of ethnography allows one to consider the gun person's identity in light of his life-world, or environment as mediated by those things that matter to him. In some contexts, guns represent something very much like what Alasdair MacIntyre calls a "practice," where socially established activities generate a sub-community of discourse within the broader human form of life. Thick description contrasts with the polarized gun rhetoric that

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[8] Indeed, Fisher concludes ("The Social Construction," 25) that "the conversation is dominated by the most vocal advocates on both sides of the issue, who are most committed to their positions, most likely to step forward to argue and advance their respective cause and less likely than more moderate voices to concede ground in the debate, which only underscores the polarization."

[9] Fisher, "The Social Construction," 4.

sees the opponent one-dimensionally, as simply an enemy to be conquered.

Third and related, the ethnographic approach allows for this encounter on guns to occur amidst the affections of an ongoing friendship. It is in the nature of true friendship that each of the friends undergoes transformation as the relationship endures over time. As Aristotle pointed out, the self of a true friend is in a real sense in the hands of her friend.[10] Only through the contemplation of a friend may we know ourselves. Conversation within a friendship thus contrasts with the politicized discourse described above wherein the self is both thinned out and walled in within its narrow political identity. For all of these reasons, the ethnography I present complements the philosophical analysis.

TWO WAYS OF CONCEIVING OF PRACTICAL REASON ACCORDING TO TAYLOR

Charles Taylor helps us see clearly how different conceptions of practical reason are inextricably linked together with moral psychological considerations. In "Explanation and Practical Reason," Taylor delineates and contrasts two conceptions of practical reason, "apodictic" versus "*ad hominem*."[11] Apodictic practical reasoning according to Taylor is an offshoot of the epistemological tradition that privileges a procedural conception of reason and embraces naturalism, an ontological picture that denies the relevance of the good, or of incommensurably "higher" aims and values in human life. When it comes to moral debate, apodictic reasoning presumes the full self-consciousness and self-clarity of the interlocutors, debates—if they are to count as "rational"—will possess self-evident, fully explicit criteria for adjudicating differences, and parties will immediately recognize conditions of defeat. All this implies that moral argument takes place in a neutral field, something like a properly refereed soccer match, so that the judgment of one side as victorious will be absolute ("2-0") rather than more or less.

There are problem with this conception, Taylor avers. For one, it easily spawns moral relativism when one becomes conscious of the more plodding and protracted nature of real moral debate. For another, naturalism's projection of a neutral field of moral argument turns out to be deceptive. While naturalism's proponents seem to have eschewed the human dimension of higher goals and desires—positing a neutral field—they are actually just failing to acknowledge them in

[10] Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*. trans. Martin Ostwald (London: Pearson, 1999), Book VIII.
[11] Charles Taylor, "Explanation and Practical Reason," *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 34–60.

open speech. They have, in other words, followed a way of inarticulacy. Taylor in fact connects this moral inarticulacy, a source of apodictic practical reasoning, with the cultural phenomenon of instrumentalism.[12]

Ad hominem practical reason, by contrast, does not presuppose an imagined field of neutrality but begins with our deep commitments, or "strong evaluations" in Taylor's language. For the "self-interpreting animals"[13] Taylor believes us to be, the full and practical outworking of these deep commitments is not readily visible to us through individual introspection. We are, like Augustine said, puzzles to ourselves. An implication is that practical reasoning will often be embedded within interpersonal relationships, such as a mature or a budding friendship, where commitments are discovered and indeed transformed through time. Furthermore, Taylor claims, our moral commitments are never just ours, as our obsession with the priority of the individual may mislead us to believe. Rather, they reside within our practices, which locate us in relation to other agents. Therefore, it is in relation to our inescapable social practices that our accounts of these commitments are to be tested for faithfulness. Rather than the following of a specific procedure, the essence of practical reason is found in the attempt to answer the question, "What makes the best sense of our communal forms of life?"[14]

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[12] In the conclusion (chapter 25) of *Sources of the Self*, Taylor discusses instrumentalism at length. He offers a reading of instrumentalism, and the controversies surrounding it, as a frame for interpreting the tensions characteristic of the modern western identity. See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 499–512. Further, for an important representation of Taylor's thesis tying together practical reasoning under the modern (i.e., "apodictic") conception we have been discussing with a habitual inarticulacy with regard to the higher values that motivate us, see Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 75–90, and especially, 86–87. Tellingly, the chapter title where these pages appear is, "The Ethics of Inarticulacy."

[13] See the essay of this name in Charles Taylor, *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 45–76.

[14] Naturalism's presence in ethics is detectable in moral theories that claim all evaluative terms can be reduced to "descriptive" terms. Taylor argues, however, that many evaluative terms, e.g., "courage," have no descriptive equivalents, meaning that "we cannot grasp what would hold all their instances together as a class if we prescind from their evaluative point. Someone who had no sense of this point wouldn't know how to 'go on' from a range of sample cases to new ones." The connection of moral understanding and linguistic ability is clear here. A few pages later, Taylor goes on to make clear the relation of practical reason to a kind of fluency in the moral language implicit in our practices. "What needs to be said [in refutation of naturalist moral theories] can perhaps best be put in a rhetorical question: What better measure of reality do we have in human affairs than those terms which on critical reflection and after correction of the errors we can detect make the best sense of our lives? 'Making the best sense' here includes not only offering the best, most realistic orientation about the good but also allowing us best to understand and make sense of the actions and feelings of ourselves and others. For our language of deliberation is continuous with

The examples to which I now turn to defend my thesis illustrate both dimensions of practical reason: its embodied and social character and its setting within interpersonal relationships over time. The first example comes from a family gathering and helps refute instrumentalism. The story illustrates the claim that it is not sufficient to think about tools like guns as mere instruments, as one's repeated use of particular tools contributes to the production of a world of meaning. The second demonstrates the tension in the contemporary gun debate between, on the one hand, an instrumentalist understanding of guns, and, on the other, one that acknowledges their place in a socially established way of life.

EXAMPLE 1: UNCLE JOE'S GUN INTERRUPTS A FAMILY GATHERING

Typically, our inchoate understandings of the meanings of artefacts come into view only when we encounter them in unexpected places. On Christmas vacation of 2016, my wife, three children and I had come to the home of my mother-in-law where all five of my brothers and sisters-in-law had gathered for the holiday, ten adults and eight children in all. On this particular night, several first cousins were there visiting with their families. This meant the number of small children was multiplied, and since one of these cousins was recently married, a new spouse was in the mix.

The main floor of this house has space enough for three centers of activity. The dining room had two board games going atop its mammoth table, each with about five players participating, the room just off the kitchen serves those wanting to focus on conversation and catching up, while the large living room provides two activity centers: kids might gather to watch TV or to play on one side, while several adults converse or play a game on the other. This is more or less how we had arranged ourselves on this night.

Even happy families are not perfect, but this kind of gathering has always felt to me like a safe haven from the competitive world. With no goal external to being together, you can let your guard down and enjoy each other. The presence of new members—the aforementioned husband of my wife's cousin—made it also an occasion for broadening our affections.

Now in the midst of this social, familiar activity, out of the corner of my eye I spied a handgun. We were in the part of the living room opposite the TV. Joe, my sister-in-law's husband, was carrying it in the small of his back. Sitting on a high stool caused the handle to protrude upward and out from its concealment in his jeans. The positioning looked uncomfortable, and I imagine letting it come up and show

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our language of assessment, and this with the language in which we explain what people do and feel" (Taylor, *Sources of the Self,* 54, 56–57).

itself was a fair trade for a bit of relief. Or did Joe mean to let us see it?

The sight stopped me in my tracks, and I absented myself from his vicinity, craving space to process. Safe in the bathroom I tried to get a handle on my feelings, or at least recover my composure. My emotions changed from shock to anger. As I have already mentioned, guns represent a foreign world to me; it was as though I had been somehow tricked into playing on unfamiliar turf: something in the rules that constitute the relations we had been enjoying had suddenly changed. The anger I felt was born of my sense of powerlessness to respond. Was this an intentional "move" on Joe's part? If so, what did it mean? I found myself fantasizing about "fighting back" with the only weapon available to me: words. Joe never went to college, so I felt some advantage when it comes to verbal sparring. Perhaps I could "cut him down to size" in return for surreptitiously placing himself in what I took to be the "high place" of social authority. Clearly, I had already interpreted his game in an uncharitable light.

But why the "high place"? The term suggests a hierarchical social setting, yet my earlier description of family gatherings suggested that they lack such jockeying for power that is constitutive of other social events. That is what makes them so joyous. Some other dimension of, or intrusion upon, the gathering was being revealed here—something in contradiction with the simple joy described above. But what to make of it?

I can now see how some of the terms I grasped at to interpret Joe's gun were supplied by American culture wars—terms whose ubiquity can infect even moments of simple joy, causing one to feel on one's guard against signs that one's largely unreflected political sensibilities are being challenged. But here I wish to focus on a different and more basic question. How might my immediate response to Joe's gun reveal something about the social significance of guns for us? That is, how are guns embedded within and productive of worlds of shared meanings?

RECLAIMING THE BODY: THE WORLD OUTSIDE YOUR HEAD

In his recent book *The World Beyond Your Head: On Becoming an Individual in an Age of Distraction*, Matthew Crawford explores the nature of human attention.[15] He focuses especially on how, through bodily engagement in our physical surroundings, we come to be a certain kind of self or agent inhabiting a world that answers to our abilities. He is especially interested in how tools extend our bodies into the environment, shaping those environments in terms of the significances

[15] Mathew Crawford, *The World Beyond Your Head: On Becoming an Individual in an Age of Distraction* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), 45–68.

they hold for us. Tools can open up a world to our perception by training us to attend to our environments differently. Ultimately, Crawford's work helps us to see tool use as formative, in the sense of shaping what the user recognizes as valuable and thus leading her to inhabit a particular world of significances.

Crawford's insights shed light on the particular joy I have experienced in the course of my relationship with Joe. Joe is handy, having formerly worked as cabinet-maker and now as an operator of heavy equipment. Being an intellectual, I have enjoyed talking to him about topics where either he is more of an expert—construction, car and motorcycle mechanics—or brings a non-academic perspective, such as the politics of the workplace, and even theology. I have found that, seeing the world as a craftsman, Joe has an intimacy with aspects of the built environment I lack and a wonder about the physical world that I have not.[16] I once stood mesmerized in his workshop amongst a great variety of tools, all impeccably ordered, a library of sorts. I find Joe's perspective frequently illuminates me, while remaining to a degree strange. The variety of topics on which I have found our discussions fruitful further implies that Joe's formation as a craftsman is not merely of local importance—not just limited to interactions with and knowledge of physical artefacts—but informs his thinking about the other subjects as well.

Because of his familiarity with the world of tools and craftsmanship, Joe provides me with a window into a world different from my own. We exist in more or less the same physical surroundings, but his skill development—the shaping of his attention, Crawford would say—has made him more discerning of this world under certain aspects. Of course, this also means that we live, to an extent, in different worlds. If tools account for part of the way the world appears to us, it would follow that Joe's love of guns—their handling, firing, even building his collection of them—creates a real if not unbridgeable distance in the worlds we inhabit.

Crawford's work also calls attention to the way worlds of experience are worlds "for us," shared worlds that we inhabit as social animals. He asks us to consider the typical, institutional painted walls such as the ones in the library where he sits working on his book. What color are they? Well, who's asking? Perhaps the occasion is an art class, and the instructor asks his students this question in order to get them to see as a painter sees. Such looking would ultimately find, depending on the time of day, various shades created by patches of light and shadow. But why, in ordinary circumstances, if a patron were

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[16] On a recent family outing, Joe and I hiked into the rain forest on the Olympic Peninsula. As I soaked in the awesome fir trees silently, he found myriad forms of life, from the forest floor to heights of the canopy, worthy of attention—and photographs.

asked the color of the walls in the reading room, would she automatically respond, "They're beige!"? It is because, Crawford explains, our ordinary perceptions are mediated by familiarity with social conventions. One such convention is the way contracted painters come in with buckets full of a single color and roll it on.[17]

When I saw the gun and holster in the small of Joe's back I was for a moment, jarred and disoriented. It wasn't only the object *qua* object that grabbed hold of my attention; indeed, I already knew what guns look like. It was also that this gun was out of place. I have been formed to look at guns as belonging in a particular context, one that couldn't be made to align with the "safe haven" of our family gathering. My own social training has led me to understand the fitting context for guns to involve police officers and soldiers, not ordinary citizens and most definitely not family members on the occasion of a holiday get together. Furthermore, the way I was trained to think of guns is rooted in my identity which is equally socially constructed. My shock and even anger on this occasion had much to do with this challenging of how I was trained to look at things. I was socially disoriented. Thus, my reaction was not simply to challenge Joe's judgment, but to bring the rest of society's judgment to bear on Joe's actions. I wanted to express that Joe's behavior was out of sync with what "we" take to be normal.

Thus, if Joe's familiarity with guns has led him to be able to perceive the world under certain aspects that are not "on my radar screen," it is nevertheless equally true that he and I live in a shared world, one constituted in part by social practices. Our knowledge of guns is always already mediated by their inclusion in such practices. While we participate in different social practices, one in which Joe and I both participate is that of family. What's more, this combination of difference and commonality frames the challenge of our discussion of guns and their significance. It indicates both the difficulty and the unavoidability of negotiating the stakes we had in simply being present at the family gathering.

Both aspects of this encounter—the way the use of tools is world-shaping and how worlds so shaped are unavoidably social—weigh against the claims of instrumentalism. That guns *qua* tools have a place within world-shaping practices so that their meanings are never merely private but also part of a socially negotiated space implies that instrumentalism misrepresents their significance.

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[17] As Crawford notes, to see the blotches of distinct shades is in fact to dig underneath normal perception. Individuals who see the shades, as an artist does, have in fact gone through a sort of training, the first stage of which is to "un-see" in the normal way. A popular picture suggests to us that perception is rightly understood by beginning with static images recorded by the retina. These images are then somehow arranged to form the composite image we report when asked. This loses sight of the connection between seeing and *training*. Crawford, (*The World Beyond Your Head*, 143–144).

Still, what determines whether, or to what extent, the negotiations of our differences in a world that Joe and I are destined to inhabit together becomes the occasion of joy or consternation? The decisive factor would seem to be our openness to each other, across these differences.

Example 2: Continuing the Dialogue with Uncle Joe on Guns

After a year or two of reflecting on the night of the family gathering in light of some academic research on gun culture, I engaged Joe in a direct discussion of guns. When I asked Joe for research purposes to teach me the basics of guns in the summer 2019, he surprised me a bit by the enthusiasm of his "yes." He apparently relishes the opportunity to give newbies a proper introduction, even those he would rightly surmise to be highly suspicious of guns and gun ownership such as myself. In addition to being highly disciplined in his approach, I found him to be deeply knowledgeable about the physics of guns. He asserted, moreover, that the goal of such training is to be found in the employment of guns for sport and implied that when people start shooting at each other the world has, in effect, been turned upside down. I know that he practices target shooting and other gun skills, and he was drawing on many previous experiences of teaching this course in gun basics when I entered his "classroom" (i.e., his dining room).

Our session began with Joe behooving me to use the term "firearm" rather than "gun," and the importance of proper vocabulary re-surfaced throughout. He pointed out that what I was tempted to call a "bullet" was actually the "cartridge," and what I wanted to refer to as the "handle" was the "grip." He was further adamant to distinguish the oft-misused "clip" from the "magazine." Clearly, for him, proper terminology closely correlates with proper understanding, as one cannot hope to arrive at the latter without developing good linguistic habits. I further came to see that the goal of this part of the lesson was to prod me to attend to the gun as a machine, a physical artifact, and to remove the mystique guns have for such as me. In this case, what we were handling was a CZ 9mm pistol. The technically correct terminology promotes a sense of sober realism about guns. With this comes a sense of seriousness and respect. Yet I wondered what kind of moral myth about guns Joe presumed I had been clinging to.

In line with his seriousness about guns, I found that Joe's approach to his guns was characterized by strict discipline. This was reflected in the first stage of the lesson where Joe presented me with a yellow card with the four basic rules of "Gun Safety" printed on it. They include, "1. All guns are always loaded; 2. Never point the gun at anything you are not willing to destroy; 3. Keep your finger off the trigger until your sights are on the target; 4. Be sure of your target and what's

beyond it." That he had these cards ready to hand testifies to Joe's commitment to "basic firearms training" as well as his seriousness about guns. For Joe it is possible, and necessary, to keep guns within a rule-governed arena.

Joe's demeanor through the lesson was not only serious and precise but also warm and welcoming. I mentioned above that I was a "newbie" to be brought into greater understanding of guns. The pace of the lesson was measured, a clear sign of his intention to provide a comfortable and caring learning environment. Joe is a natural teacher, one who meets students where they are and provides space and encouragement for growth. There was also a sense in which Joe was trying to ease the newcomer's fear of guns as such and convert it into a respect that would permit a greater intimacy with them. Finally, Joe intimated that he saw himself as a kind of emissary from the community of gun owners to an outsider. My fear of guns was partly responsible for my suspicion of the gun owner community. His warmth, then, was equivalent to an act of diplomacy. Indeed, he was offering his welcome on behalf of the gun community.

Practical Reason, Language, and Inarticulacy in Our Speech About Guns

Moral debate about guns has been hampered by the influence of instrumentalism. Instrumentalism, moreover, shapes our conception of practical reasoning by dichotomizing the agent into "body" and "mind," indeed making of the body little more than an instrument to do the will's bidding. Flowing from this comes a conception of practical reason where means are never recognized as constitutive of the end but merely more or less efficient ways to bring it about. Instrumentalism furthermore removes the human agent from the matrix of shared, social understandings. As a result, the arena of practical reasoning is imagined as a neutral playing field populated by equal (and equally transparent) players, the frictionless minds of modern epistemology. Contrast this with actual situations of dialogue where socially established practices, permeated by shared understandings, set boundaries for what can reasonably be claimed.

In a sense, both of these approaches are present in my gun lesson with Joe. The instrumentalist or apodictic approach can be discerned in the way Joe speaks of guns primarily as neat, if dangerous, mechanical devices, and the social practice approach can be found in the way Joe clearly viewed our encounter as an opportunity to welcome me into the new family of gun-people as well as an occasion to generate good will across the divide between gun-people and non-gun people. But, as I will argue, the inability to identify, to name, this tension between instrumentalist and non-instrumentalist understandings is precisely one of the factors holding the debate back.

Speaking the Language of Mechanism

Turning back to the experience of my firearms instruction with Joe, a first area to consider is the self-conscious attentiveness to language characteristic of Joe's approach to guns. Joe was careful to call each component of a gun—or, rather, a "firearm"—by its proper name. The technical character of such terms—"grip" and "cartridge"—mediates viewing guns as mechanisms, and the mechanical viewpoint carries a sense of seriousness and objectivity. The aura of objectivity was, I believe, one reason for Joe's being particular about words. Of special interest here is how such mechanical discourse about guns informs discussions of their social import.

Joe is impressively articulate about how a gun works; he sees, we might say, the "telos" of a gun qua mechanical instrument quite clearly. When the gun is understood, that is, in terms of its mechanical function—i.e., what it "does" and how—one ought to praise Joe's knowledge. His articulate knowledge at this level, as displayed in my account of our dialogue above, links guns themselves to a broader family of mechanical instruments in which he situated them. For instance, broaching the topic of highly dangerous contraptions in general, he spoke of how guns contrast with explosives and generally to chemical substances that in combination are highly dangerous. Guns, mechanically speaking, he suggested are better compared with other propelling devices such a sling-shots, even the human arm and hand "loaded" with a rock, than with explosives. He spoke as an engineer. Joe did not altogether avoid acknowledging the power of guns, reflected in their effects upon targeted objects. Yet he used relatively cold terms in this regard, such as the verb "destroy" within his rule #2, "Never point the gun at something you are unwilling to destroy." The dramatic difference between destroying, say, an empty coffee can versus a human head is left unuttered.

This assumes that what a gun is "for" is circumscribed by its character as mechanical instrument. Where the limits of this mode of speech about guns become apparent is where the meaning of guns goes beyond the mechanical to the social. If I place the discussion of the mechanical similarities of guns to slingshots and even to a human arm in the context of two gun collectors conversing about design, or maybe about the history of gun engineering, we may rightly admire the savvy on display. Yet Joe's insistence on the relevance of gun mechanics to another kind of discussion—namely, the discussion we once had about whether we needed more rigorous legal restrictions to protect us from gun violence—ought to unsettle. To be clear, in this latter context Joe's reference to the mechanics of guns as being like human hands and unlike explosive devices, diverts attention from their use as effective killing machines. Indeed, any frank review of the history of guns would reveal that the objective of killing other humans is evident

within their design as mechanical instruments.[18] Joe as much as admitted this when he explained to me the basic difference between handguns and rifles from a performance perspective, the former maximizing maneuverability for short range skirmishes and the latter accuracy at a distance.

What is left out of Joe's knowledgeable speech about guns as mechanical artifacts? Precisely the social significance of the degrees of lethality just about any impartial observer might note as she considers "artifacts" from semi-automatic handguns to sling-shots to a human hand throwing a rock or a punch. Joe would admit that violence or destruction is a possible end found in each of these "instruments" but remained curiously muted about the markedly disparate potential for degree and intensity of harm "built into" the gun. His refusal leads further to a failure to attend seriously to the varied motivations that might cause persons to want to acquire guns (of various kinds); guns remain a mere curiosity, a hobby, for Joe. In sum, Joe's knowledge of guns as mechanical artifacts, then, fails to also see guns in terms of their social "ends."

Joe is impressively articulate about how a gun works, identifying the "telos" of a gun qua mechanical instrument quite clearly. When the gun is understood merely as a mechanical artifact, Joe's erudition is laudable. But, again, this assumes that the gun's telos is exhausted by its character as mechanical instrument. Yet the telos of the gun as a *social* artifact discloses another and quite different arena in which the task of making linguistic sense of guns is correspondingly distinct. To grasp the gun's social telos requires another kind of linguistic skill and awareness. Indeed, what seems to be needed is a kind of bifocal vision or ability to move between the mechanical and social where necessary.

Some unconscious motivation seems to be pressuring Joe to suppress the incommensurable, and differently complex, set of questions that necessarily accompany speech about guns as socially meaningful objects. The failure to note the transition from mechanical to moral vocabularies bespeaks a motivated suppression of unquestionably relevant material for moral consideration. What does this suppression have to do with the underlying ethical structures I identified earlier in this essay? The moral psychology of instrumentalism provides ground for thinking of guns primarily as mechanisms, as morally neutral tools. Instrumentalism thus funds the popular moral rhetoric—"guns don't kill people; people kill people"—that aids and abets this discursive

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[18] For an illuminating account of how gun makers adapted their production and marketing strategies to capitalize on emergent fears about crime and social unrest, see Evan Osnos, "Making a Killing: The Business and Politics of Selling Guns," *New Yorker*, June 26, 2016, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/06/27/after-orlando-examining-the-gun-business.

suppression by lending an aura of moral legitimacy to those who speak this way. The apodictic conception of practical reason that fails to acknowledge its own grounding in social practices and sees all means as equally arbitrary steps to attain an end can thus be seen as an undercurrent within Joe's attentiveness to terminology, or his favoring in these circumstances the language of mechanics for a discussion of guns.[19]

Our concepts are thus helpful in diagnosing what is hampering the debate. A questionable model of practical reasoning is intimately related to an importantly incomplete understanding of what our guns mean for us. Apodictic practical reasoning captures the mechanical aspects of guns but in a language that obscures the wider context of human goods that are indeed relevant. Yet the same discussion between Joe and me, in other respects, tacitly acknowledged the social dimension of guns.

Welcome to the Family

An additional facet of my gun lesson with Joe to reflect on in the light of our ethical tools is suggested by the warm and welcoming tone of the encounter. I noted above the generous attitude Joe adopted as teacher. He shared with me later that day his prayer that my mind may have been brightened by his teaching and that, if he had succeeded in changing my ill opinion of guns, I might, in turn, represent them to my students in a good light. One dimension of this welcome goes beyond the student-teacher relationship to signify Joe's offering me an introduction to, if not an induction into, a community that provides its

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[19] A similar point is illustrated by a related discussion Joe and I had about the design of certain firearms. I found Joe to equivocate in his answer to the question of whether firearms are "meant for destruction." For instance, we were going over safety rules—specifically the rule never to point the gun at anything you are not willing to destroy—when the topic of people shooting guns at one another came up. Joe pretended the idea of people using guns against other people to be strange and abhorrent, an anomaly. Yet I noted that much of our discussion of the functionality of rifles—which provide excellent accuracy—versus handguns—superior in maneuverability—seemed to presuppose self-defense or attack with regard to other people as the backdrop (at least the paradigmatic backdrop, as certain sports can be imagined to likewise value these qualities in distinct guns). Like the example of a preference for mechanical language, the discussion of design I believe reflects the pressures toward inarticulacy coming from the first conception of practical reason. A motivation, and consequence, for Joe's equivocation regarding gun design might again be a desire not to have to attend to the violent motivations that might naturally lead persons to acquire guns. Put differently, were Joe not held captive by the instrumentalist conception of practical reasoning, such that guns figure as mere instruments, might he not see that handguns especially have certain "will," certain ends, embedded within their design—such that their features cannot be adequately described without value-rich vocabulary: the willing of ends that, if he must acknowledge them, he would be sure to find worrisome?

members with a distinctive social identity. Joe saw his task as to "familiarize" me with guns, both in the sense of overcoming ignorance and supplanting alienation with friendship.

Gun ownership stands in constitutive relationship with a certain socially generated identity. Evidence for this is that Joe enjoyed talking about what made the paradigmatic gun owner an exemplary person. That is, our lesson about guns naturally led to the issue of the kind of discipline a gun owner ought to cultivate. An avid movie watcher, Joe enthusiastically acknowledged the aptness of my allusion to Karate Kid to illustrate the claim that with the acquisition of superior destructive power comes the obligation for superior discipline. On the other hand, Joe's go-to example of gun wielders lacking the requisite discipline, and thus tarnishing the image of gun users in the minds of the ignorant, were kids in the "inner city" whose ostentatious displays of bravado were tell-tale signs of failure to embody the character befitting of a gun owner.

In a similar vein, an MA student of mine for whom guns have been part of the furniture of the world since early childhood responded to a writing assignment by describing marksmanship as a MacIntyrean practice,[20] making reference to how the ethos of a shooting range is cooperative, requiring and developing trust among marksmen that they will exercise heightened vigilance and care for each other's safety, animated by a practitioner's tacit grasp of the purpose behind the rules of behavior established for the shooting range. He went on to describe how marksmen recognize select experts as embodying the highest standards of excellence within the practice, the habits of mentorship commonly found in order to train new members of the community, and a shared history outlining how the practice has evolved over time. He concluded that marksmanship named a community where virtues are developed.

How do we make sense of such testimonies that guns are connected to morally formative communities? *Ad hominem* practical reasoning makes clear how our habitual means, including tools, are part of the moral picture. They are not merely instrumental to, but also *constitutive of*, the ends themselves. Furthermore, ethics is not restricted to evaluating the allegedly solitary will. The moral agent is an embodied agent, actively involved in the surrounding world. How one engages the world shapes how one knows it and how one is disposed to act within it. Thus, on this conception of practical reasoning the moral life is viewed as one of ongoing formation, where our actions and our characters inform each other with an ultimate end, a "telos," providing direction for the journey.

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[20] For Alasdair MacIntyre's now classic definition of a practice, see *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), 187.

In an email exchange, Joe and I had broached the issue of "mistakes" made by armed individuals, on this occasion a police officer's shooting of an unarmed young person. I suggested that simply holding a gun affects what appears "relevant" to a situation, shaping one's instantaneous answer to the question, "what is going on?" In support of my suggestion, I attached a psychological study linking the mere holding of a gun to the misperception of objects as threatening in one's visual field. Joe was unwilling to even enter such a discussion. Rather, he shut it down directly by simply noting that I seemed to be moralizing gun ownership. "You seem to be suggesting guns are bad." My suggestion, implying that the gun-to-gun wielder relation is a two-way street, would of course challenge the moral freedom of the instrumentalist's disembodied will, a key feature of this moral psychology.

As the gun lesson demonstrates, correlative to the social identity of the gun owner is an idea of proper discipline, both as a means to and a reflection of socially recognized moral character. Yet, the pressure to view guns as mere tools subverts the very idea that there is a kind of moral character proper to a gun owner. For in our discourse, the former serves to keep guns out of the moral equation, and this puts all of the discussion of practices and histories connected with guns off limits. In sum, a kind of cognitive dissonance should arise for anyone who attempts to think at one time both along instrumentalist and moral community lines. Our conceptual tools have helped us to unearth two modes of understanding that exist side by side within our discourse about guns. One mode involves seeing guns primarily as mechanical instruments or human artifacts. Another mode views them first and foremost as a part of the way "we" live, as implicated in a moral community. It seems that our ability to readily name and identify this tension within our speech about guns is critical, a necessary condition for that bifocal vision mentioned above. For, as we have seen, it is possible to muddle along unawares of this contradiction in our thinking and dispositions toward guns.

One reason a participant in this debate might have for failing to acknowledge this tension has to do with the attractiveness of the ideals of freedom and self-transparency held out by the apodictic model of practical reasoning. A symptom of the ubiquity of instrumentalism in our lives is that we idealize a "freedom" that is predicated on the ability to raise ourselves above the social practices and common understandings in which our lives are lived. This conception of freedom makes sense against a historical background focusing on western politics and science. On one hand, gaining freedom from traditional political authorities whose power was legitimated by traditional beliefs

required a new epistemology where the individual would take responsibility for what and how she believes.[21] On the other, the success achieved by modern science through de-personalizing the forces of nature led moral philosophers to aspire to a similar objectivity, resulting ultimately in an impersonal "morality." These two forms of freedom feed the picture of moral freedom as self-transparency and disengagement reflected in instrumentalism.

Put differently, to engage in *ad hominem* practical reasoning is to risk exposing one's commitments and facing the fact that by virtue of these one is always already bound to others. Learning to acknowledge the limits of our control over our identities exposes us to certain risks, foremost perhaps that of becoming vulnerable to transformation. Once opened in this way, there is no clear limit to what one may discover to be implicated in the construction of our identities. Openness to *ad hominem* dialogue about guns in America could easily broach the issues of how our histories of racial and gender injustice have shaped our identities. In my reference to discipline above, I noted that Joe used the term "inner city" as short hand for undisciplined gun owners. Yet, antiracist studies point out that the term "inner city" has become a kind of code—the meaning of which we perhaps hide even from ourselves—for African Americans. Thus, when considered in light of practical reason that recognizes constitutive means, racism too becomes a relevant, perhaps inescapable, subject matter when it comes to our guns. We become thus not only vulnerable to one another but vulnerable in relation to our own histories.[22] A greater awareness of the problem has the potential to be the beginning of a richer dialogue.

Before concluding, I turn to a short consideration of the work of Rowan Williams to address the question of language's relation to risk and transformation. Williams's contribution becomes relevant when it becomes clear that to move forward into a richer dialogue between gun people and non-gun people requires a willingness of the participants to risk exposure and change at a personal level.

ROWAN WILLIAMS ON LANGUAGE AND GRACE

Rowan Williams's work on language and art allows us to address the roots of our resistance to the kind of risk implied by *ad hominem*

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[21] For a brief and helpful summary of this history, see Matthew Crawford, "How We Lost Our Attention," *The Hedgehog Review* 16, no. 2 (2014): hedgehogreview.com/issues/minding-our-minds/articles/how-we-lost-our-attention.

[22] For an ethnographic study that presents guns in the context of de-industrialization, race, and gender, see Jennifer Carlson, *Citizen Protectors: The Everyday Politics of Guns in an Age of Decline* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). See also Jennifer Carlson, "The Equalizer? Crime, Vulnerability and Gender in Pro-Gun Discourse," *Feminist Criminology* 9, no. 1 (2013): 59–83.

practical reasoning.[23] It permits us to address the question, "Why is it that human beings use language to protect ourselves?" In other words, Williams finds a tension within human language use itself. To explain this, he finds it necessary to distinguish two forms of linguistic behavior, which roughly map onto Taylor's apodictic and *ad hominem* conceptions of practical reasoning. "Description" names the use of language to map one's surroundings for orientational and practical purposes. It is akin to the instrumental character of apodictic reasoning. The trouble comes when Description becomes reductionism, the willful limiting of reality to what fits my own purposes or interests, manifesting an underlying craving for control. We saw elements of this in Joe's speaking about guns as mechanisms. "Representation," by contrast, sees language use as participation in a reality truly other than the self, such that "the known object is active in the knowing subject beyond the knowing subject's full grasp."[24] Representational uses of language, for examples of which Williams turns to the arts and especially novels, have the capacity to enlarge the self as they transfigure the world. Just as Taylor's apodictic practical reason mirrors Williams's Description by presuming the full availability of the good in human consciousness, so Taylor's *ad hominem*, likening practical reasoning to bringing inchoate evaluations into greater articulacy, resembles Williams's Representation. Both have role for self-discovery within relationships lived out over time.

According to Williams, our craving for Description's predictability stems from a profound fear that our sense of self and world is under threat. In the case of my relationship with Joe, this fear manifests as the willingness to suppress the tension created by embracing by turns an instrumentalist and a community focused understanding of guns, rather than grappling with it, since to do so would require deeper examination of the sources of one's identity. Williams, in a lecture on the *Gilead* novels of Marilynne Robinson, notes that the resistance to give up control gives rise to and finds protection in a "moral" identity that invokes a sense of membership in a community of other "good people" of the most toxic sort.[25] This too maps onto some aspects of

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[23] Williams' most prolonged treatment of language use can be found in his Gifford Lectures; Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

[24] Language as Representation, Williams writes, "absorb[s] the life of what is encountered at a level that makes it possible both to recognize and to represent that life in another form" (Williams, *Edge of Words*, 60).

[25] Williams elaborates that what he means by an identity based upon "goodness" is one where the "I" or "We" defines itself on the basis of what I/we do right, graces of our behavior. The emphasis lies on what the I/We have done, in order to be or become the virtuous sort of people we are, whether the reference be to one's individual moral heroism, one's refined upbringing/education, or one's family's honor. For the good Christian folks of Gilead, it is sometimes about accounting for the way they have been "blessed." Williams calls this phenomenon, and the identity based upon it, "toxic

Joe's invocation of a gun community, as when he ritually extended a welcome to me to begin to join such a community through our gun lesson and subsequent discussions. Of course, it must be said that toxic community construction can and does easily come into being among non-gun people as well.

So, argues Williams, we find ourselves in the paradoxical position of having to turn to language in order to free ourselves from the effects of language. What is needed is that use of language that shows us the associations through which we are always already implicated in the lives of others. Here, Williams turns to novels as exemplary. The conversion required by reading such good literary works, he argues, involves learning to see the other, the one we have identified as a threat, as in fact a source of grace. I add that only such an insight, the kind that what Williams calls "Christian literary witness" may provide, is likely to get us to take the risk required for a deeper, a transformational, debate about guns. In short, language as Representation means seeing our own deeper participation in reality as precisely what would save us.

What, then, are the implications of the distinction between language as Description and as Representation for Joe and me? On one hand, I have noted some resemblance between the "gun community" to which Joe welcomed me and the protective, insular life that flows from Description and Instrumentalism at their worst. This is most apparent when a simplistic binary of bad guys and good guys is used to define boundaries, but it often comes in more subtle versions. Yet there is too the possibility that this very sense of communal identity includes the resources for deeper social searching, a fruitful awareness of its own implicatedness in the reality of its human other. Further, the temptation is equally present for non-gun people to write off gun people using definitions that are equally deceptive in their clarity. Representation, on the other hand, reminds us of the need for a language that displays the shared character of our world, which for us both I am afraid means facing our painful histories, including their elements of race and gender injustice.

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goodness." It is sustained by a repression of how the I/We is implicated in lives of those others against whom it defines itself. Thus, Williams names the purpose of Christian literature like Robinson's novels as "to reconnect goodness to reality." Rowan Williams, "Address to 2018 Theology Conference at Wheaton College," YouTube, www.youtube.com/watch?v=R58Q_Q3KEnM&t=2311s. Portions of the program were published in *Christian Century*. See, "Faith, Imagination, and the Glory of Ordinary Life: Marilynne Robinson and Rowan Williams in Conversation," *Christian Century*, March 25, 2019, www.christiancentury.org/article/interview/faith-imagination-and-glory-ordinary-life.

Conclusion: A More Self-Aware Dialogue

Our debate about guns in America is stymied. I have argued that the study of ethics can help us diagnose silences and distortions in the debate and help point a way forward. In particular, a critique of the ethical concepts undergirding our discussions of guns helps us to see that these concepts both suppress much of what might be said in regard to guns and give rise to a certain tension between, on one hand, an instrumental reading of guns and, on the other, a social understanding of them. In this paper, I have explored how a conception of practical reason shaped by instrumentalism (or "apodictic practical reason") funds this tension, as well as why *ad hominem* practical reasoning allows us to name it, a first step toward a richer debate. Finally, I briefly treated the work of Rowan Williams on language as shedding light on the risks of self-exposure that must be accepted if we are to move forward into the richer discussion about the place of guns in our common life toward which *ad hominem* practical reasoning points. MT

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