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The Nature and Meaning of Pacifism

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Definitions of "Pacifism"

Even a quick survey of books and articles about pacifism will reveal that the term, "pacifism," is defined by scholarly authorities in two quite different ways. Some authorities define "pacifism" as the belief that "the use of violence for any purpose is always wrong." Fotion and Elfstrom call this "full-bodied" pacifism,¹ Brown and Marrodes call it "categorical" pacifism² and I will follow Reinhold Niebuhr and call it "absolute pacifism."³ Other authorities define "pacifism" as "the belief that it is wrong to use violence as a means of solving international conflicts." Jenny Teichman calls this "anti-war-ism,"⁴ Peter Brock calls it "anti-militarism,"⁵ and I will follow Niebuhr again and call it "anti-war pacifism."⁶ The distinction between these two definitions is not just a matter of scholarly hair-splitting but which you select and advocate makes a real, practical difference. In the first place, if you are merely an anti-war pacifist, you are not opposed by logical necessity to the use of violence by police or parents, for example, as a means of solving internal or domestic problems. If, however, you are an absolute pacifist, you oppose both the use of physical force by the police and corporal punishment by parents. In the second place, the distinction between absolute and anti-war pacifism is of practical importance if you are, as most of us are in one way or another, a Christian. Brock, for example, argues that pacifism began

with Christianity⁷ and Teichman, following Brock, argues that Hindu rejections of violence which predate Christianity are not the same as pacifism.⁸ Such arguments obviously make no sense at all if what is meant by "pacifism" is "absolute pacifism." Ancient Hindus clearly rejected the use of violence for any purpose. Whether they make sense if what is meant is only "anti-war pacifism" is a matter for argument among Christians. Brock claims that Christians until 170 A.D. advocated anti-war pacifism,⁹ but as prominent a theologian as Adolf Harnack disagrees.¹⁰ The question, "Does being a Christian require one to be a pacifist?" is both difficult and important, but it becomes impossible unless we first agree on what is meant by "pacifism."

Just in case it might occur to you at this point that we might resolve such disagreement by simply consulting the dictionary, let me inform you that dictionaries waffle. Both of my American dictionaries¹¹ say that "pacifism" is "opposition to war or violence as a means of resolving disputes." They say, in other words, that pacifism is either anti-war pacifism or absolute pacifism, and maybe both. I add, "and maybe both," because if you are an absolute pacifist, you are also an anti-war pacifist. However, you could be an anti-war pacifist without being an absolute pacifist. You could believe that war-violence is the only kind of violence which must be opposed as always wrong.

As a philosopher interested in military ethics, I want to know why anyone would believe in pacifism, in either form, at all. Because pacifism is, after all, a moral position, a belief that certain kinds of action are wrong, I want to know what underlying ethical beliefs are used to support

it. It might seem that all I need to do, then, is to find some pacifists and ask them to state their supporting beliefs. Unfortunately, this approach won't work. I won't because, first of all, pacifism is not for all pacifists an empirical position which they adopt or reject for factual reasons, but for many pacifists is ultimately a metaphysical position which they embrace or abandon because of beliefs about that which in their faith transcends this factual world. This is the point Stanley Hauerwas seems to be trying to make when he says that pacifism is more like a virtue than a belief justified by its effectiveness.¹² Unfortunately, he also suggests thereby that virtues cannot be practical and effective strategies cannot be virtuous.

It is not helpful, secondly, to ask pacifists to provide their own supporting beliefs because they are pacifists not merely because of what pacifism stands for but also because of what pacifism opposes. As the history of pacifism shows all too well, there is very little intrinsic value in being a pacifist. Even in the United States, where they have been the least mistreated, pacifists have been commonly reviled, imprisoned and physically abused.¹³ People are pacifists despite the real risk of physical danger because they are against violence in general or war in particular. Violence inflicted upon others, for pacifists, is worse than violence inflicted upon themselves. Thus, to understand and, indeed, even to discover their supporting beliefs it is necessary to understand what they oppose and why they find it so wrong they will risk personal injury or death.. to oppose it.

The Dialectical Opposites of Pacifism

The anti-war pacifist is opposed to the belief that it is morally right in certain circumstances to engage in war with other nations. It has been suggested that the proper name for this belief which anti-war pacifists oppose, is "militarism." Although tempting, this suggestion must be rejected because, as Kjell Akjelsback points out, the term, "militarism," is "thoroughly pejorative."¹⁴

To call someone a "militarist" is to attribute to that person evil characteristics. In contrast, the term, "pacifist," is a descriptive and morally neutral term. If you hear me call someone a "pacifist," you don't know whether I intend an insult, but you know I do if I call someone a "militarist." This is because "militarism" is not the belief that war is sometimes necessary and morally right but rather the belief that military institutions and modes of decision-making are superior to and should replace civilian institutions and modes of decision-making.¹⁵ This belief is blameworthy because as held by those in the military it is blatantly self-serving. It is the other belief, the belief that war is sometimes necessary and morally right, that is the opposite of pacifism and, as Alfred Vagts first realized, requires a separate name. Vagts suggested calling it "the military way,"¹⁶ but this as it suggests a practice rather than a belief won't quite do. There is, however, a readily available term, dictionary-defined as the opposite of pacifism, that will do. The term is "bellicism," which I will use with the meaning, "the belief that war is sometimes necessary and morally justified in solving international problems." It is

"bellicism," so defined, that is the dialectical opposite of anti-war pacifism.

To name the dialectical opposite of "absolute pacifism," we need a term to label the belief that the use of violence in solving personal and social problems is sometimes necessary and morally right. I will borrow one from behavioristic psychology, which describes violence as "the use of aversive consequences,"¹⁷ and call the dialectical opposite of absolute pacifism, "aversionism." Notice that if you are an aversionist, you are not necessarily a bellicist, that is, you might believe that the use of violence is sometimes justified but never justified as war. On the other hand, if you are a bellicist, you are an aversionist. If you believe that war-violence is sometimes right, you certainly believe that it is sometimes right to use violence to solve problems. It follows then that you could be both an anti-war pacifist and an aversionist. Many anti-war pacifists have believed, for example, that capital punishment is sometimes justified.¹⁸

As indicated earlier, the opposition between bellicism and anti-war pacifism, on the one hand, and aversionism and absolute pacifism, on the other, is dialectical in that these opposing beliefs interact with and depend upon each other. Historically, when pacifists are in the minority and are opposed by a majority which seeks an increased use of violence, pacifism becomes stronger and more absolute. On the other hand, when pacifists are accepted by the majority or when they constitute the majority, pacifism, grows weak and less absolute.¹⁹ If however, opposition to pacifism is itself absolute, pacifists can and have been eliminated

completely within particular societies.²⁰ Pacifism, in other words, seems to require for its healthy survival opposition from non-pacifists that ranges between the extreme limits of lethal violence and total acceptance.

Why Are There Pacifists?

In a very real sense, then, there would be no pacifists unless there were non-pacifists, but recognizing this doesn't tell us why pacifists can't accept aversionism or bellicism. Let us, first, consider aversionism, the belief that violence is sometimes necessary and morally justified in solving social and personal problems. Elizabeth Anscombe, a noted advocate of aversionism, argues that most important human values require a stable society, but every stable society will be confronted upon occasion by those who seek to disrupt it and will not stop short of being killed. Social authorities, then, must be empowered to use violence when necessary against both internal and external enemies.²¹ Necessary to this argument is the unstated assumption that there is in reality and human nature an evil aspect which will erupt periodically and can be put down only by violence.

In response to this argument, an absolute pacifist, while agreeing that social stability is necessary for basic human values and agreeing that there are those whose actions threaten social stability, would reject the belief that in some cases violence is necessary to preserve social stability. For the absolute pacifist violence itself is an evil and the use of violence for any purpose simply generates more evil and more violence.²² Underlying this rejection of violence is the necessary and unstated assumption that there is a moral law governing reality which guarantees that all evil actions will be punished and all good actions will be rewarded. This moral law may be

backed by a personal God²³ or it may be an impersonal law, like the law of gravity,²⁴ but what is important is that given such a law and given the belief that violence is always evil, it follows that eventually all evil will be eliminated and we can hasten this desirable end by practicing absolute pacifism.²⁵

Both the absolute pacifist's belief in a moral law which guarantees the eventual elimination of all evil and the aversionist's belief that there is in the world evil which can be controlled only by violence are metaphysical assumptions which cannot be tested by appeal to facts. At the same time, the absolute pacifist's claim that violence always leads to additional violence and the aversionist's claim that the use of violence sometimes reduces violence seem to be factual claims. The difficulty, however, is that each group, following opposing metaphysical assumptions, arrives at differing interpretations of the same set of facts. The history of the human race is a history of violence and war, which for the absolute pacifist is proof that violence begets more violence. For the aversionist, however, it is proof that some violence can be controlled only by violence. Because it is possible, and apparently plausible, to arrive at differing interpretations of human history it is also possible and plausible for many pacifists to accept violence and to be, therefore, only anti-war pacifists.

In order to understand why some pacifists can advocate the use of some violence, it is necessary first to consider the meaning of "violence." Violence always involves the exercise of power or force, whether physical or psychological, but the exercise of force is not violent unless "made operative against resistance,"²⁶ or is used, in other words, "to cause a

person to change contrary to will."²⁷ For the absolute pacifist it is always wrong to cause a person to change contrary to will. For the anti-war pacifist, however, whether it is morally wrong depends upon the circumstances. Many absolute pacifists, Tolstoy, for example, have argued that it is wrong to participate in or support the activities of any state because to rule is to be violent.²⁸ Ghandi, although an absolute pacifist, disagreed, but only because he believed a non-violent state, including a non-violent police force, was possible.²⁹ On the other hand, non-absolute, anti-war pacifists, including the Quakers, have argued that anarchy is worse than the use of violence, that the obvious worth of law and order justifies the use of force by magistrates.³⁰ Quakers, in fact, in the early days of the United States also kept slaves and endorsed the death penalty.³¹

If domestic law and order is an end that will justify violence as a means for non-absolute pacifists, why do they refuse to justify war-violence as a necessary means for international law and order? Their reasons are both practical and moral. Rheinhold Niebuhr argued in 1928 that while violence is effective in dealing with a criminal minority within a society, it will not work against large numbers of either internal or external enemies. Given a rebellious majority within a society, we must avoid the use of violent force and try to establish mutual respect. War, as a means for dealing with external enemies, is both completely useless in that it leads only to more and more total war and completely immoral in that it destroys those who are innocent.³²

The anti-war pacifist, then, disagrees with both the bellicist's claim that war is sometimes necessary and the claim that war is sometimes morally

justified in resolving international conflicts. For the anti-war pacifist war is never necessary because war-violence, much more so than other forms of violence, breeds more violence.³³ This is so because violence among nations is both more intense and more difficult to control. The police can focus violence upon criminals only and if police-violence becomes too intense or diffuse, the non-criminal citizenry can control it. War-violence, however, is backed by fully mobilized national resources and is subject to no third-party control.³⁴ The threat of nuclear war provides no new reasons for being an anti-war pacifist, but it does make obvious, to some for the first time, the difficulty of limiting war-violence.³⁵ War-violence not only feeds upon its own intensity, but as it becomes increasingly intense and diffuse inevitably leads to the destruction of the innocent. Police-violence, if it spills over on to non-criminals, is abhorred and checked, but the innocent are routinely the victims of war-violence. The use of war-violence, therefore, can never be morally justified.

All anti-war pacifists argue that war must be rejected because it has not solved international problems and because it inevitably produces immoral consequences.³⁶ Some anti-war pacifists, the Mennonites and Quakers, for example, argue also, in a manner similar to that of absolute pacifists, that there is a moral law which guarantees that by practicing anti-war pacifism war will be eliminated eventually.³⁷ Anti-war pacifists, in other words, may rely upon supporting beliefs which are either empirical or metaphysical...

The formal logical relations among the two forms of pacifism and their opposites may be summarized simply: No absolute pacifist is an aversionist;

no anti-war pacifist is a bellicist; all absolute pacifists are anti-war pacifists; all bellicists are aversionists; and some anti-war pacifists are aversionists.³⁸ What cannot be so neatly summarized or diagrammed are the dialectical tensions which as repellent push both pacifists and non-pacifists into positions which are increasingly metaphysical and antagonistic and which as attractive draw them into increasingly pragmatic and compromising positions. It has been long recognized that "the thought of every group" may be viewed "as arising out of its life conditions."³⁹ What is not so well recognized is that when the thought of one's own group is under attack or when one attacks the view of opponents, one is "forced to make one's own view appear infallible and absolute."⁴⁰ In the case of pacifism vs. non-pacifism one's own view is made to appear infallible and absolute by asserting that the behavior deemed to be morally right is sanctioned by the nature of reality itself. The reality appealed to, however, is not reality as revealed by observation but a reality that transcends the facts and is accessible to true believers only.

More encouraging, however, is opposite possibility. Given a social situation in which pacifists and non-pacifists are not mutually threatening, it is conceivable that they may be willing to look at the facts and circumstances and learn from each other concerning the nature and use of violence.

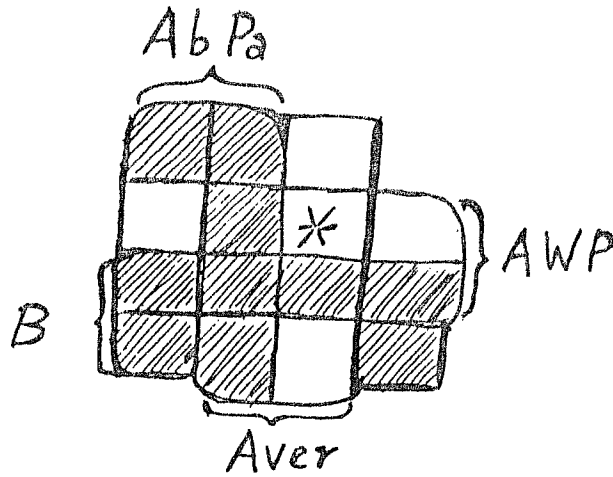
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NOTES

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2. H.O.J. Brown and George Marrodes, "Nuclear War May be Necessary," in War and Human Nature (St. Paul: Greenhaven Press, 1983), p. 91.
3. Reinhold Niebuhr. Love and Justice (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1957), p. 277-278.
4. Jenny Teichman, Pacifism and The Just War (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 4.
5. Peter Brock, Pacifism in Europe to 1914 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 3.
6. Niebuhr, op. cit., p. 10.
7. Brock, loc. cit.
8. Teichman, op. cit., p. 10.
9. Brock, op. cit., p. 7-11.
10. Adolf Harnack, Militia Christi (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), pp. 65-69.
11. Cf. The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), p. 941; Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary (Springfield: G. & C. Merriam, 1963), p. 604.
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13. Peter Brock, Twentieth-Century Pacifism (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1970), pp. 52-60.
14. Kjell Skjelsbaek, "Militarism, Its Dimensions and Corollaries," in Problems of Contemporary Militarism (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), p. 77.
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18. Brock, Pacifism in the United States (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), pp. 86-88, 877-878.
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20. Ibid., pp. 464-468.
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22. Brock, Twentieth-Century Pacifism, pp. 94-99.
23. Brock, Pacifism in the U.S., pp. 372-373, 424, 482.
24. Brock, Twentieth-Century Pacifism, p. 94.
25. Richard B. Gregg, "Nonviolent Resistance Can Eliminate War," in War and Human Nature, pp. 186-187.
26. Cf. The American Heritage Dictionary, pp. 513, 1431.
27. Richard Becka, "Violence and Its Justification," unpublished manuscript, p. 5.
28. Brock, Pacifism in the U.S., p. 600.
29. Brock, Twentieth-Century Pacifism, p. 89.
30. Brock, Pacifism in the U.S., p. 878; cf. also Pacifism in Europe, pp. 51-53, 133.
31. Brock, Pacifism in the U.S., pp. 86-88.
32. Niebuhr, op. cit., pp. 248-252.
33. Gregg, loc. cit.
34. Seyom Brown, The Causes and Prevention of War (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), pp. 119-120.
35. Donald L. Davidson, Nuclear Weapons and the American Churches (Boulder: Westview Press, 1983), pp. 177-180.
36. Brock, Twentieth-Century Pacifism, pp. 250-254.
37. Brock, Pacifism in Europe, pp. 105-113, 340-345.

38. These logical relations may be diagrammed as follows:



39. Karl Mannheim, "Ideology and the Sociology of Knowledge," in Readings in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences (London: The Macmillan Co., 1968), p. 122.

40. loc. cit.