



Jan Narveson, 'Pacifism: A Philosophical Examination'¹

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¹ A retrospective on Jan Narveson, 'Pacifism: A Philosophical Investigation', *Ethics* 75 (1965): 259-271. All references to sections and page numbers are to this article, unless otherwise noted.

Narveson's article appeared in 1965, halfway through between the Cuban Missiles Crisis (1962) and the Tet Offensive (1968). The Cold War - in which the USA and the USSR did not shed each other's blood - was still the dominant model of war in American consciousness, and hundreds of thousands of American soldiers had not yet been thrown, to kill and be killed, into the fields of Vietnam. Michael Walzer had not yet published his landmark *Just and Unjust Wars* (1977);² the Trolley Problem, central to contemporary discussions of the permissibility of killing another person, had not yet made an appearance; and there was hardly any work in extant philosophical literature on the ethics of killing in general, and the ethics of war in general, let alone on pacifism.³ Narveson's piece, if only for those reasons alone, is remarkably prescient of debates to come. It is also still widely cited in the contemporary ethics of defensive force in general and of war in particular.

Its central thesis is that pacifism is an incoherent doctrine. For pacifism holds (or so Narveson tells us) that it is always morally wrong to use force against violence - in other words, that all individuals have a right not to be treated violently, for short a right to security. Yet one cannot have a right without also having a right to do whatever is necessary to protect oneself from breaches of that right. Therefore, to have a right to security - a right which is central to pacifists'

² Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars* (New York: Basic Books, 1977).

³ A JSTOR search conducted for the purpose of writing this introductory piece with the title-keywords 'pacifism', 'war' and 'killing' yielded 55 results under Philosophy for the years 1900-1965, and 244 results for the years 1966-2013. Even accounting for the fact that *Philosophy and Public Affairs* and the *Journal of Political Philosophy*, which are both generous hosts for articles on those topics, were founded after 1965, this strikes me as a significant increase.

rejection of violence - is also to have a right to do whatever is necessary to remain secure and thus to use force – which is precisely what pacifists deny. Or so Narveson objects.

Importantly, Narveson does not deny that individuals are morally permitted not to defend themselves against violence should they so wish: his claim is that they cannot on pain of being incoherent turn their wish not to use violence into a moral principle by which we should all abide. Nor does he deny that individuals are morally permitted not to defend others against violence: his claim is that there is no basic moral duty to defend others but that *if* one lives in a community whose members conventionally expect of one another that they will defend one another by force, then one should either fulfill that obligation or emigrate.

Reading this article in the light of nearly five decades of work in this particular area of normative ethics, one is left with the sense that although Narveson misdescribes and misses his target, he nevertheless hits on avenues of inquiry which have not been fully explored. Pacifists will begin by querying the way he characterises their position. For surely it is open to them to say, not that they oppose the use of any kind of force against violence, but that they oppose the act of killing, or even grievously maiming, another person in self-defence or in defence of others. This would enable them to block Narveson's objection that they cannot endorse punishment (to the extent that punishment is forceful.) Even so, they would still have to confront what one may call the 'what about your mother?' objection – in other words, the objection that if one act of killing is morally justified, surely it is the act of defending one's mother from a brutal murderer. As applied to war, they would still have to confront what one may call the 'What about WWII?' objection – in other words, the objection that if one war was justified, surely this one is. Narveson rightly points out that the strength of the pacifist's conviction is most severely

tested by these kinds of cases. Pacifists have attempted to block those objections by distinguishing between absolute pacifism (of the kind attacked by Narveson) and contingent pacifism (defined as opposition to killing and war in almost all circumstances), or between universal pacifism ('we should all oppose violence') and relative pacifism ('only those who describe as pacifists are under a duty to oppose violence'.)⁴ None of those positions is without serious difficulties – some of them articulated by Narveson himself. In particular, contingent pacifism as a rejection of war under current circumstances is so similar to just war theory as to be undistinguishable from it, so much so that one is left to wonder what is left of pacifism as a coherent and distinctive doctrine.

That said, pacifists ought not to be moved – indeed have not been moved – by the charge of incoherence which Narveson levels at them. For a start, having a right does not *logically* entail having a right to do whatever is necessary to protect that right: the claim that the latter follows from the former is precisely what pacifists deny, and to assert that claim without providing an independent justification for it begs the question. In addition, that claim yields the conclusion that, for example, I have the right to kill dozens of innocent bystanders to prevent you from pinching my nose if that is the only way to stop you.⁵ This surely is

⁴ For a typology of different types of pacifism, see Andrew Fiala, "Pacifism," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2010), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2010/entries/pacifism>.

⁵ For criticisms of Narveson's arguments, see Cheney Ryan, "Self-Defense, Pacifism, and the Permissibility of Killing," *Ethics* (1983): 508-524; Jenny Teichman, *Pacifism and the Just War: A Study in Applied Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).

unacceptably permissive, and pacifists are thus on strong grounds to reject Narveson's criticism out of hand.

However, although Narveson does not succeed in undermining pacifism anymore than he succeeds at establishing defensive rights, he does raise anew the question of what we may do in defence of our rights or the rights of others. That question has not yet received fully satisfactory answers. Given the avalanche of works in the ethics of defense and in just war theory through which we now have to wade, this may seem a surprising diagnosis. And yet, advocates of defensive rights all too often trust in the verdictive force of the intuition that surely we may use force, indeed kill, in self- and other defense, while pacifists place the fate of their opposition to violence in the contrary intuition that we may not do so. But more work than has been recently carried is needed to adjudicate this clash of intuitions. In addition, proponents of the view that war is sometimes justified all too often conclude that here and now, it is not – for example because under current circumstances it would be disproportionate; in so doing, they are left with the task of working out what we may do, in defence of rights, when war is not an option. Narveson's question-begging and implausible move against pacifists invites us to think again, and harder, about defensive rights. Thus, while meant as a rebuttal of pacifism – and in part successful as such – Narveson's article perhaps unwittingly also presents a serious challenge to its critics. This, I think, is why it remains a classic to this day.