

# Why Do Professional Academic Philosophers Ignore the Worldwide Problem of Guns and Gun Violence?

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By *the problem of guns and gun violence*, I mean this:

Owning, carrying, or using guns is rationally unjustified and immoral because, **first**, the primary function of guns is coercion, *and* coercion of any kind is rationally unjustified and immoral, precisely because it consists in treating people like mere means or mere things, and therefore violating the universal and strict moral obligation always to treat everyone with sufficient respect for their dignity, and **second**, because owning, carrying, or using guns, by means of the empirically well-confirmed “weapons effect” (Berkowitz and Le Page, 1967; Berkowitz, 1968; Bartholow et al., 2005; Bushman and Romer, 2021), inevitably leads to gun violence, which injures, maims, or kills people—including those owners, carriers, or users of guns who unintentionally or intentionally (as, for example, in suicide) injure, maim, or kill *themselves*, Nevertheless, **third**, billions of people worldwide still own, carry, or use guns, and enact gun violence, and yet billions *more* people who *don’t* actually own, carry, or use guns, or enact gun violence, *also believe* that

it's rationally justified and morally permissible—or perhaps even obligatory—to do so.

This problem *obviously* applies in the notorious case of the USA, where there's constant gun violence all over the country, especially including daily mass shootings (GVA, 2023). And no wonder: the individual and collective right to “bear arms” is built into the basic content and structure of the US Constitution, via its Second Amendment, thereby making the USA the world's only *gunocracy*; 32% of the population in the USA own 393 million guns—i.e., 120 guns for every 100 Americans; and 44% of the population live in gun-possessing households. But it's *also* the case that people own, carry, or use guns, and enact gun violence, or at least believe that it's rationally justified and morally permissible—or perhaps even obligatory—to do so, *in every country in the world*. The mass shooting at Charles University in Prague, on 21 December 2023, is a gruesome case in point. And in this connection, it should especially be noticed that the problem of guns and gun violence applies *not only* to individual, unaffiliated people who own, carry, or use guns, and enact gun violence, *but also* to members of the police and other security forces, armies, and militias of all kinds, *insofar as* they own, carry, or use guns, and enact gun violence. So the problem of guns and gun violence *also* applies to the armed policemen at Charles University who are pictured at the top of this essay.

To be sure, you might disagree with my reasoning and my conclusions. And of course, I'd have to respond cogently to the obvious objection that it's at least *sometimes* rationally justified and morally permissible or even obligatory to “take up firearms against a sea of troubles” in self-defense or in order to protect innocent others. To anticipate, the key point in my response is that (i) *freely choosing* to own, carry, or use guns (guns as a liberty right, which I'm saying is always morally impermissible), is fundamentally morally different from (ii) *being forced* to use guns as a last resort when every other minimally sufficient means of self-defense or protecting innocent others has been exhausted (guns only under extreme duress, which I'm saying is sometimes morally permissible or even obligatory). Nevertheless, the very idea of “good guys with guns” is inherently morally flawed (Hanna and Heftler, 2022). Being forced to use a gun under extreme duress is *a lesser evil*, and *not* a good thing. But bracketting out the rest of that response for the purposes of this essay, and also pointing to other essays in which I've responded to that objection at greater length (Hanna and Paans, 2019; Hanna, 2023a: section VI), I think that no one can reasonably and sincerely deny that the problem of guns and gun violence is, at the very least, *an extremely important, perennial, and also pressingly urgent contemporary problem that mortally affects all of humankind*.

Now, it's a mere truism to point out that the contemporary professional academy—including, of course, professional academic philosophy—is obsessively

concerned with identitarian multi-culturalist moral and political issues and policies, promulgated under the triune marching banner of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. It's not a mere truism, however, although it's still plainly true and widely-known, that during 2023 the professional academy hoisted itself with its own petard not once, not twice, but *three* times, by clearly and distinctly publicly demonstrating its pervasive *commodification*, *mechanization*, and *moralization* (Hanna, 2023b). **First**, its commodification, by virtue of *pricing itself out of its own higher education market*, in demanding exorbitant tuition costs but at the same time no longer providing guaranteed higher incomes for its student-consumers as compared to their non-higher-ed-consuming cohort, who don't incur the same crippling debts for their job-accreditation or job-training (Tough, 2023). **Second**, its mechanization, by virtue of *being invaded by mind-snatching chatbots* (Hanna, 2023c, 2023d). And **third**, its moralization, by virtue of not only *its morally illiterate response to the Gaza War*, which failed to understand that intentionally killing innocent people is rationally unjustified and morally impermissible no matter who does the killing, and that two moral wrongs never make a moral right (Hanna, 2023e, 2023f, 2023g, 2023h), but also *its hypocritical double-standard for free speech*, as plainly displayed by the testimony of three Ivy League university presidents (French, 2023).

That all being so, what seems to me *most* remarkable and yet at the same time *least* publicly well-known, is the very curious and deeply troubling fact that with only a *very* few exceptions, the professional academy in general and professional academic philosophers in particular, not only in the USA but also globally, *simply ignore the worldwide problem of guns and gun violence*.

For the purposes of this essay, I'll focus on professional academic philosophers. By way of confirming my claim empirically, I did an electronic advanced search, using the search terms "gun" and "guns," through the archives of the *Philosophy in Europe* list (aka PHILOS-L), which posts thousands of notifications about philosophy talks, conferences, workshops, journals, essays, books, and other items of interest to professional academic philosophers, not only in Europe but also globally, per year, all the way back to 1989, when the list was created. What I found was that there was exactly *one* notification in all those thirty-four years that dealt directly with the problem of guns and gun violence, namely a "CFP," or Call For Papers, for the July 2015 issue of the journal *Essays in Philosophy*, on the topic of "Philosophy & Gun Control" (Riddle, 2014). An identical search through the *PhilEvents* list of "Conferences, CFPs, and Seminars in Philosophy" turned up exactly the same information about notifications (PE, 2023). I also searched the *PhilPapers* archive and found one edited bibliography entitled "Gun Control," with 47 items on it, going back to 1997 (Hsiao, 2023). But every item in that bibliography is either (i) a philosophical defense of an unrestricted moral and/or political right to own, carry, or use guns (aka "bear arms") or (ii) a critical argument for more-or-

less restricting that right, which is precisely analogous to a set of 47 essays or books either (i\*) philosophically defending an unrestricted moral and/or political right to own slaves and treat them as mere means or mere things, or (ii\*) philosophically presenting a critical argument for more-or-less restricting that right—for example, banning certain kinds of whips and chains, or requiring background checks for prospective slave owners and masters. The *abolitionist* question of whether owning, carrying, or using guns, per se, is rationally unjustified and immoral, or not, is *never* raised.

These search results, in and of themselves, are truly astounding and indeed morally and politically scandalous. What, then, is the explanation for professional academic philosophers' *consistent*, and even *relentless*, avoidance of an extremely important, perennial, and also pressingly urgent contemporary problem that mortally affects all of humankind? In my opinion, the general explanation is *conformist, lockstep thinking*—in a word, *groupthink*—that *effectively blinds* professional academic philosophers, especially including those professional academic philosophers who seriously think and write about moral and/or political philosophy, to the worldwide problem of guns and gun violence. Unpacking that general explanation further, here are three specific reasons why this moral and political groupthink happens.

**First**, the problem of guns and gun violence *doesn't even merit a salient blip* on the moral and political radar scope of the contemporary orthodoxy within professional academic philosophy that consists of the conjunction of *identitarian multi-culturalist social justice theory, non-human-animal ethics, and ecophilosophy*. My speculation here is that it's precisely because the problem of guns and gun violence is a moral and political scandal that mortally affects *all of humankind*, but *doesn't exclusively or primarily* mortally affect (i) any currently favored identity groups suffering oppression by virtue of their having that specific identity—say, women, Black people, LatinX people, transgender or non-binary people, gay or lesbian people, Ukrainians, Palestinians, etc., etc., (ii) non-human animals, or (iii) the natural environment. So, from a professional academic careerist point of view, seriously thinking or writing about the problem of guns and gun violence would be nothing but “a waste of precious time” that should instead be spent working on acceptably orthodox or hot, trendy topics, thereby yielding publishable essays or books, and more generally advancing your professional academic career and status, as you slither up the greasy pole from graduate school to contingent or tenure-track employment, to tenure and associate professorship, to full professorship, to fellowships and grants, to a named Chair in a top-ranked philosophy department, to retirement as an emeritus or emerita professor, and finally to your death. —Perhaps in a mass shooting on the campus of your own college or university, blown away by one of your students, or even by another professional academic (Guardian, 2023).

**Second**, virtually all professional academic philosophers believe *the Hobbesian or neo-Hobbesian myth* that rational human animals are, inherently or by human nature, egoistic and mutually antagonistic (deterministic or indeterministic) automata (Hanna, 2020), hence people’s owning, carrying, or using guns, and enacting gun violence, are simply *necessary consequences* of their human nature, which therefore cannot be rationally criticized from a moral and/or political point of view.

**Third**, virtually all professional academic philosophers are *liberal Statists*, whether classical Hobbesian or neo-Hobbesian liberals, communitarian liberals, neoliberals, or libertarian minimal Statists. (Yes, professional academic moral and/or political philosophy is *so* diverse, egalitarian, and inclusive: *all different kinds of liberal Statism* are represented there.) Therefore, since all liberal Statists are morally and politically supportive of coercive authoritarianism by means of guns and gun violence, when it’s carried out by the State, its government, and its police or military forces, then it follows that they’re all at least implicitly supportive of *some powerful people’s* owning, carrying, or using guns, and enacting gun violence, *as long as they get to control*, or at least *as long as they get to endorse*, whoever it is that’s pulling the trigger.

If I’m right about all of this, then the groupthink that so effectively blinds professional academic philosophers, and especially those professional academic philosophers who seriously think and write about moral and/or political philosophy, to the worldwide problem of guns and gun violence, is in fact *overdetermined* by several individually sufficient reasons. But that’s self-evidently *not itself* an adequate philosophical excuse for consistently ignoring, as I’m now saying for the third and last time, an extremely important, perennial, and also pressingly urgent contemporary problem that mortally affects all of humankind.

So, contemporary professional academic philosophers not only *can* but *should* get their acts together on this one, think self-critically and feel empathetically, open up their manacled minds and manacled hearts, and then try to do whatever they can to raise the level of professional academic and public consciousness about the problem of guns and gun violence, and thereby rationally open up other people’s minds and hearts. And perhaps—just perhaps—they might then even defend the “crazy” radical doctrine of what I’ve called *gun abolitionism* (Hanna, 2023a), or propose “crazy” radical solutions that implement what I’ve called *the extended Banksy effect* (Hanna, 2023i). But in the meantime, I’m not holding my breath.<sup>1</sup>

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