

French Philosophy and the American Gun Debate : An Application of Denis Diderot and Albert Camus to 2018 America

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Since the Columbine school shooting in 1999, the national focus on school and mass shootings in the United States has increased dramatically. So far, in just the first few months of 2018 alone, the Gun Violence Archive, GVA, has recorded 54 separate incidents of mass shootings. For clarity, the GVA defines a mass shooting as: "a numeric value of 4 or more shot or killed, not including the shooter" ("Methodology"). Suggested solutions for the current gun violence epidemic in the U.S. vary greatly, with some going so far as to suggest arming teachers and faculty in schools, and others that propose confiscating citizens' weapons without due process. More moderate solutions include restricting access to military grade weaponry and better background checks for purchasers of guns. Most recently, the school shooting in Parkland, Florida on February 14th, 2018, which resulted in the death of 17 people, has re-ignited the national debate about how to prevent further gun violence and loss of life. Despite the massive outcry since this shooting, there has yet to be a consensus on the solutions for the gun violence epidemic. This article proposes an

application of the philosophies of Denis Diderot and Albert Camus, whose philosophies both examine the notions of freedom and justice, to the current American gun control debate, since today's controversy regarding guns might be read as a debate on those very ideas. This paper does not propose which solution is best for the gun violence epidemic. Rather, an examination of the writings of Diderot and Camus would lead one to conclude that a citizen's individual will should not outweigh the justice and safety of all citizens and that the general will should guide our legislators in finding a solution.

Denis Diderot is one of the most recognized French philosophers from the Enlightenment, an intellectual movement in the 17th and 18th centuries that celebrated the use of reason. In 1755, Denis Diderot published the article, "Droit naturel" in the *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*. Therein Diderot states that "l'usage de ce mot est si familier, qu'il n'y a presque personne qui ne soit convaincu au - dedans de soi - même que la chose lui est évidemment connue" (Diderot). In the American gun debate, on television, in political debates, and in student led rallies, many seek to weigh the right to bear arms against the right to live in a peaceful society. Those who speak on this topic seem to be confident in their understanding of our "droit naturel." Florence Yared, a survivor of the recent shooting in Parkland, Florida, said, "The right to bear arms ... does not and never will overpower the individual's right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" (Willingham). Her understanding of the *droit naturel* is that she has the natural right to life and that her right to life overpowers other's right to bear arms. In contrast, in 1982, Senator Orrin Hatch (R-UT) issued a report that the Second Amendment's right to bear arms is intended "as an individual right of the American citizen to keep and carry arms in a peaceful manner, for protection of himself, his family, and his freedoms" ("The Right"). For Sen. Hatch, the right to bear arms entails the means to protect the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of

happiness rather than something that infringes upon it, as Miss Yared suggests. The conversations about the right to bear arms often assume that the individual's right matters most importantly, defining the individual right as the Second Amendment or the individual right to life.

Diderot's writing on *le droit naturel* creates a dialogue with a man who seeks to put his individual will above the will of others. The passionate man, seeking to satisfy his own needs, asks, "Quel est celui d'entre vous qui sur le point de mourir, ne racheteroit pas sa vie aux dépens de la plus grande partie du genre humain, s'il étoit sûr de l'impunité et du secret" (Diderot). In a country with 54 mass shootings within the first 4 months of 2018, that question bears great import. Should American citizens have their right to bear arms controlled when many people argue that guns provide the best means to protect oneself when one is "sur le point de mourir"? This idea supports that of Sen. Hatch, who would agree with the passionate man, that the right to bear arms protects people who are "sur le point de mourir." Those in life threatening situations are guaranteed the right to protect themselves, even if that right could in turn hurt "la plus grand partie du genre humain."

Those who support unrestricted gun access accept that their right to bear arms allows others who could harm them, or the better part of humanity, to bear arms. The passionate man assumes that if he agrees to accept the consequences of an unrestricted Second Amendment, the rest of society should also be willing to accept those consequences. Equally, those who argue for stricter gun laws agree to sacrifice or limit the Second Amendment and ask gun advocates to sacrifice it as well. "Je ne suis pas assez injuste pour exiger d'un autre un sacrifice que je ne veux point lui faire," Diderot's passionate man says, in a belief that he is both reasonable and just in the use of his rights (Diderot). One group is willing to sacrifice safety while another is willing to sacrifice access to

guns. In this argument, no one who seeks to place their individual rights above others can reasonably succeed.

However, Diderot refutes the passionate man's argument, when he says, "quand bien même ce qu'il abandonne lui appartiendrait si parfaitement, qu'il en pût disposer à son gré, et que la condition qu'il propose aux autres leur seroit encore avantageuse, il n'a aucune autorité légitime pour la leur faire accepter" (Diderot). In the article "Gun Control: A European Perspective," Vincent Muller proposes that the right to bear arms depends upon the society in which one lives. The Second Amendment should "find its limits when it infringes on the rights of others to 'safety'" (Muller). Even though the right to bear arms may be advantageous to all citizens, no individual can force another to take advantage of it. Similarly, restricting access to certain guns may be advantageous to the safety of all citizens, but no individual can force another to forfeit their rights. Muller proposes that individual liberty should be limited by the right to safety by all citizens. Albert Camus, who repeatedly wrote on the mutual exclusivity of liberty and justice, substantiates Muller's proposal. Albert Camus assembled his writings from during and after the Second World War to create *Les Actuelles*, which focus partially on the sacrifices made during the war and balance between liberty and justice after the war.

In the context of post-World War II France, liberty involved the liberation from Germany and justice included the punishment of Nazis and their collaborators. Liberty also included the liberty of those who had collaborated and did not receive punishment. Mauriac d'Ormesson argues that "Il s'agit de mettre en harmonie la liberté de l'individu, qui est plus nécessaire, plus sacrée que jamais, et l'organisation collective de la société que rendent inévitable les conditions de la vie moderne" (*Actuelles I*). Camus responds that, while humanity should seek to accomplish both liberty and justice, governments cannot achieve them in tandem. "La liberté pour chacun, c'est aussi la liberté du banquier ou

de l'ambitieux: voilà l'injustice restauré" (*Actuelles I*). Not only are liberty and justice mutually exclusive, but justice requires the sacrifice of someone's liberty. As Camus states in *Les Actuelles*, "La justice doit s'acheter avec le sang des hommes" (*Actuelles I*). For example, many soldiers sacrificed life and liberty to achieve justice and to end World War II. Unlike the passionate man that Diderot describes, these soldiers willingly sacrificed their life and liberty in the benefit of the general will and justice.

In the context of the American gun control debate, liberty is the individual's right to bear arms, while justice is the restriction of that right to prevent crime against the community. As Camus writes in his response to Mauriac, "la justice pour tous, c'est la soumission de la personnalité au bien collectif" (*Actuelles I*). Justice for those who survived the Parkland shooting will inevitably be a submission, or a sacrifice, of certain liberties. Currently, Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School administration enforced a new rule that students must sacrifice their privacy and carry clear backpacks. Some of those students ask why they must give up their privacy rather than live in a society with stricter gun laws. Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School student Carly Novell tweeted on April 2nd, 2018, "These backpacks don't protect us. We aren't any safer than we were before" (@car_nove). Student Ryan DeWerff tweeted the same day, "I have not been asking for school security, I have been asking for common sense gun laws... Clear backpacks and checkpoints don't make anyone feel safe" (@ryan_dewerff).

In Dr. Helen Nahas' article *L'Evolution de la Pensée d'Albert Camus dans Actuelles*, she views Camus' argument as a continual struggle:

Dans un monde irrationnel et injuste, il faut sans cesse tenter de sauver quelques parcelles de bonheur humain. Et ceci, en termes d'action politique, se traduira par une lutte obstinée pour la justice et la liberté (Nahas).

If we apply Dr. Nahas' interpretation of Camus to the tweets of the students, we can conclude that these clear backpacks are inadequate. This school policy achieves neither justice nor liberty. Rather, this policy takes away the privacy of the school community, while it does nothing for the protection of Parkland community. It places the individual's right to bear arms above a community's right to privacy. Diderot suggests that "Tout ce que vous concevrez, tout ce que vous méditez, sera bon, grand, élevé, sublime, s'il est de l'intérêt général et commun" (Diderot). If school administrations want to achieve what is "bon, grand, élevé, sublime" for their students, then it must support general interest. The school administration should listen to the voices of the students as the general population of a school. If students feel unsafe even with the implementation of clear backpacks, the school should seek out that which would make students feel safe.

In both the context of school policy and national policy, Camus asks that we recognize that each moment of justice infringes upon the liberty of some. Absolute liberty cannot be achieved while having justice. Furthermore, Dr. Nahas' interprets Camus to say that we must "sauver quelques parcelles de bonheur humain" (Nahas). Diderot mentions this "bonheur humain" as well, and agrees that our governments should strive to achieve it:

Vous avez le *droit naturel* le plus sacré à tout ce qui ne vous est point contesté par l'espece entiere... Il n'y a de qualité essentielle à votre espece, que celle que vous exigez dans tous vos semblables pour votre bonheur et pour le leur (Diderot).

If a democracy seeks to represent all its citizens, those who vote and participate must consider the happiness of their fellow citizens as well

as their own. In the context of the American gun debate, citizens and lawmakers should not ask, "What are my 'droits naturels?'" Instead, our nation's laws should focus on what benefits every citizen. In Mark Hulliung's book *The Autocritique of Enlightenment: Rousseau and the Philosophes*, Hulliung interprets Diderot's article "Droit Naturel" as meriting "condemnation...for extolling a version of natural rights that fosters political absolutism and is an apology for whatever exists" (Hulliung, 66). Hulliung cites Diderot as appealing to "the principles of law written by all civilized nations," which Diderot writes is "le dépôt de cette volonté générale" (Diderot). While it is true that Diderot wrote this article during the reign of Louis XV and therefore during a period of political absolutism, the idea of appealing to the principles of law written by all civilized nations does not necessarily reflect political absolutism. Looking at other "civilized nations" and their laws is a necessary part in making laws for one's own nation. Though the nations Diderot was referring to were monarchies, today those civilized nations are republics. Hulliung condemns the full article based on this line about looking to other nations for the general will while ignoring Diderot's main thesis which he clearly summarizes at the end of the article. Instead of fostering political absolutism, Diderot asserts that the legislature must look to "the bonheur du genre humain," not the happiness of a monarch:

Puisque des deux volontés, l'une générale, et l'autre particulière, la volonté générale n'erre jamais, il n'est pas difficile de voir à laquelle il faudroit pour le bonheur du genre humain que la puissance législative appartînt (Diderot).

When we apply Diderot to the modern American gun debate, this quote speaks to how our nation should address this problem by looking to our

citizens. Diderot clearly states that the general will should guide legislation. Saying that the general will would never fall is to say that the individual will would fall. If "l'homme qui n'écoute que sa volonté particuliere, est l'ennemi du genre humain," then laws based on the will of individuals are also "l'ennemi du genre humain" (Diderot).

It quickly becomes evident that neither Camus nor Diderot would support the idea that an individual's right to own a gun outweighs the massive outcry in the wake of the Parkland shooting, Sandy Hook, Las Vegas, and many more. Since Camus asserts that justice will always infringe upon someone's liberty, our government must decide what sort of justice to seek. In schools, the response has been to enact policies that infringe upon the right to privacy. This policy affects the students in school but does not affect gun owners at large in the community. This policy only protects students if another student puts a gun in their clear backpack. The Sandy Hook and Parkland shootings were not committed by students in the school; therefor this policy does not address the problem. If our federal or state government wishes to enact justice to prevent further incidences of mass shootings, enacting stricter gun laws provides a clear solution, but it would also infringe upon the right to bear arms. As we decide how to address the conflict between liberty and justice, according to Diderot, the General Will should be the deciding factor. Our representatives in congress should listen to their constituents, ensure that they hear differing perspectives, and hold regular forums to decide that general will. If our government cannot discern the general will, it should look to other nations. Rather than look inward, the U.S. must research how the rest of humanity reacts to the American gun debate. What are the gun violence statistics in those nations? Can we look to other nations, such as Australia, for guidance in how to respond to mass shootings? The American gun debate will not be solved without asking difficult questions and addressing what the general will demands of our

legislators. However, as Camus wrote in *Les Actuelles*, "si la lutte est difficile, les raisons de lutter, elles du moins, restent toujours claires" (*Actuelles I*). Our American goal remains to prevent further mass shootings and so, despite the difficulty of the gun debate, we must continue to struggle.

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