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Dishonest talk of killing people

by Tom Fournier
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The mantra goes: *Guns don't kill people. People kill people.* It's an incantation helping to bind second amendment enthusiasts in raucous indignation over what they see as a threat to their liberty – gun control. Its sentences form the premises of an argument that inevitably concludes against further restrictions on guns.

Gun control advocates hear "*Guns don't kill people.*" as a willful disregard for the cause of death of so many innocents. In contrast, gun rights activists hear that same sentence as a well-deserved rebuke to those who obsess about guns as if the weapons themselves possess the malice or negligence necessarily involved in illegal gun deaths. Upon hearing the mantra, the two sides usually respond by talking past each other.

These differing reactions to the mantra illustrate an ambiguity lurking beneath the concept of killing. Objects kill. For example, cancer killed my aunt. People also kill. I was introduced to gun violence as a child when I unwittingly watched Jack Ruby kill Lee Harvey Oswald on national television. Rudy used a gun. So it's fair to say that a gun killed Oswald, and it's fair to say that Ruby killed Oswald. When humans are involved in the causal chain leading to a death, there is inherent ambiguity in our assessment of the killing. The gun mantra employs this ambiguity as a means to drive opposing sides further away from each other. That is why we should hear its utterance as preamble to a fallacy of equivocation – i.e. a deceptively bad argument that plays on ambiguity.

A sophisticated advocate of gun rights will employ the mantra to avoid honest discussion about the tradeoffs between unrestrained liberty and human carnage. That sort of discussion might fairly result in weighing the libertarian rights of the few seeking greater killing power against the libertarian rights of the many seeking safe access to public spaces. Thoughtful libertarians recognize that our right to liberty is limited when our choices impinge on the equal right of others to that very same liberty. This is a foundational principle beneath libertarianism, and it is difficult to imagine a greater violation of liberty than undeserved death. Gun lobbyists cleverly smother consideration of our libertarian right to safely

navigate public spaces with ad populum flag waving based on a decontextualized reinterpretation of the Second Amendment. This tactic further polarizes advocates on both sides of the issue while ensuring that no middle ground is found and the status quo prevails.

Huge sums of money – both domestic and foreign – are being invested in lobbying efforts to perpetuate this dishonest talk of killing people and ensure legislative paralysis. Well-meaning advocates of American freedom are being duped, and the effort to seed our social division is attracting and emboldening a dark and hateful slice of humanity. American Patriotism is being co-opted into American Hatritism. Our gun lobbies dutifully condemn the slaughter of innocents while a slice of their constituencies – the New American Hatriots – make anonymous death threats against victim's family members who speak out for reasoned gun policy. As the slaughter continues, it becomes increasingly apparent that the moral responsibility for the killing extends upstream to include more than just those who pull the trigger.

Consider a hypothetical parallel: Suppose that Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini gifted North Korea 500 million barrels of oil in exchange for Kim Jong-un agreeing to sell ISIS a nuclear weapon which was subsequently detonated in New York City's harbor. Would our righteous unleashing of accountability be limited to the detonators of the bomb, or would it extend also to the lobbying Ayatollah and to Kim?

Gun rights lobbyists gifting politicians to look the other way while military style assault weapons or high capacity ammunition magazines are sold to un-vetted users bears a moral resemblance to the Ayatollah lobbying Kim to allow weapons in the hands of terrorists. Just as radicalized ayatollahs reinterpret the Quran to justify their complicity in the slaughter of innocents, gun rights lobbyists reinterpret the second amendment to justify their own complicity in the slaughter of innocents. We might do well to respond to this moral abomination by looking beyond the long overdue passage of laws to restrict military weapons, and work as well on laws to hold *all* of those in the chain of complicity to account. Too many innocents have died, and their blood is on the hands of more than just the shooters.

Tom Fournier is a successful entrepreneur with undergraduate degrees in engineering and business management, plus a M.A. of Philosophy. His publication credits include a range of topics such as: political philosophy, social/ethical implications of technology, engineering, and aviation. You can learn more about Tom and read some of his publications at www.tfournier.com.