

Why Not Shoot?

Selmer Bringsjord

March 23, 2001

Guns and schools. You doubtless insist they don't mix, but alas, the brute fact is that many of our youth rather vehemently disagree with you: lots of young people these days have decided to bring guns to school, *and* to fire them at their classmates and teachers. You know this; I know you do. You know this because you tune into the news, at least every now and then. And so you've seen the blood, the bodies, the SWAT teams, the emotionless shooters in handcuffs and under escort, and so on. Now. I also know something else about you: I know you think that it's morally wrong for students to shoot other students. Well, let's suppose that you're absolutely, positively right: let's suppose that it *is* morally reprehensible for one student to shoot another. A question still remains: namely, Why not shoot nonetheless? I submit to you that this is a question our culture no longer wants to ask, because it no longer has an answer.

I want you to ponder the question in earnest; I know it's painful, but try it. Here's the question again, personalized, just to make sure you've got it: Imagine that your fellow students have been taunting you a lot, perhaps because you're not exactly athletic, or not exactly prepossessing; you can pick your own reason for why you're the target of teasing. So, you're angry, *intensely* angry. And you hit upon the idea of getting hold of a shotgun, and of blowing away your tormenters. Let's suppose that you know it's morally wrong to pull the trigger, but so what? Why should you be bound by morality? Why should you restrain yourself? This is a question I'm willing to bet no one has asked you to ponder previously — because it's a scary question, a *very* scary question.

Maybe you think you have an answer. There are, after all, some standard ones floating about. For example, here's one: "You shouldn't shoot because you're going to eventually get caught, no matter what, and then your life will effectively be over. At best you'll be behind bars till you're ancient; at worst you yourself will be exterminated." Unfortunately, this answer misses the point. If one is willing to accept the consequences, the question remains unanswered. I suspect this is why people commit premeditated murder every day across this (irremediably violent?) planet of ours. They know full well that murder is wrong, and that they may well get caught and convicted if they commit it, but they are willing to roll the dice because killing is what they want to do.

Another anemic response is to declare those who shoot to invariably be insane. This response simply changes the subject; elementary logic makes this plain. A question of the form "Why should

I refrain from doing X?” isn’t answered in the least by a response like: “You’re insane!” Besides, many of those who shoot are perfectly sane, by the best definitions our scientists can muster.

As to science in general, well my friend, I’m afraid no answer to the question is forthcoming from this realm. Obviously, if people decide to shoot other people frequently, the survival of our society is in jeopardy, from the standpoint of that grand scientific theory that purports to explain how we got here in the first place: evolution. But our hypothetical shooter, we can assume, readily concedes that if enough people shoot each other, the human race is in dire straits: the extrapolation is thus irrelevant. After all, the shooter is asking why he should refrain from shooting, given that he doesn’t *care* what happens to him, and to the society he finds himself in. The bottom line is that science is impotent in the face of fundamental “why” questions. Why be moral? — that’s one of those questions. Evolution may well explain why, generally, members of *homo sapiens* don’t shoot each other on a regular basis, but it cannot explain why some individual shouldn’t open fire in a schoolyard, given that this individual recognizes that such gunfire is not only heinous, but that it will likely have some rather negative consequences, both for himself and for his species.

It’s important to realize as well that education, as it is normally carried out, is also impotent in the face of “Why not shoot?” People are inculcated from the crib with the tenet that it’s wrong to kill others, save for cases like self-defense. Our parents tell us such things; so do our teachers and our clergy. But this pedagogy is irrelevant. Our hypothetical shooter is *agreeing* that shooting others is morally wrong. He is asking why he should refrain from doing that which is morally wrong, because the bottom line is that he doesn’t *want* to avoid what is morally wrong.

I will make a prediction. You may not believe it; you may find it too upsetting to consider. But I will make the prediction nonetheless. I predict that unless our society manages to answer the question I’ve placed before you, thousands and thousands of our youth are going to die in their schools from bullets tearing through their bodies, and they will lie limp in pools of blood. Moreover, I predict that, absent an answer to the question I’ve raised, the cancer that has gripped the souls of those youths belittled by their peers will grow and spread, eventually to the point where the violent death of your child at school will be treated as we treat the death of deer upon our roads. At that point, they will come and carry your dead loved one away, and everyone will continue, busy as before, driving here and there, in the quiet but constant hope that the next victim is someone else’s problem.

Selmer Bringsjord is Professor of Logic and Cognitive Science at RPI. His most recent book is *Artificial Intelligence and Literary Creativity*.