

Why I Am Still a Pacifist

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Violence is wrong. War is inevitable. The two ideas have been at odds for decades. Those who believe that war is just and those who believe that killing is unjustifiable have almost been at war over the debate. Philosophers regularly debate the topic, eager to finally put the disagreement to an end. Christian writer and philosopher Clive Staples Lewis spoke often of controversial matters within Christian belief, including pacifism. In *The Weight of Glory*, he writes in the chapter “Why I Am Not a Pacifist” of his views on pacifism. The title of the chapter leaves little room for speculation about Lewis’ stance. Lewis believes that there are not sufficient grounds to hold pacifist beliefs. He concludes of pacifists, “If I tried to become one, I should find a very doubtful factual basis, an obscure train of reasoning, a weight of authority both human and Divine against me, and strong grounds for suspecting that my wishes had directed my decision.”¹ I do not believe Lewis’ argument is conclusive, however. Though it might be possible to entirely disprove Lewis’ argument or to argue comprehensively in favor of pacifism, I intend only to determine whether Lewis’ model of moral intuition is correct, if Christian and human authority are really unanimous in their dismissal of pacifism, and if violent force is still persuasive enough to be globally effective in a pacifist society. I will not attempt to argue in favor of a pacifist system of beliefs, nor will I argue that Lewis is entirely incorrect. Instead, I will present three points which show the flaws in Lewis’ argument and in particular highlight some passages in which Lewis is creating a strawman of the pacifist position and relying on speculation to support his argument against it. I note first that Lewis has failed to account for the success of peaceful movements, only speculating on the positive effects of war. Second, Lewis presents a glorified image of wartime casualty. Third, Lewis relies on a strawman pacifist who fundamentally

¹Clive Staples Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 90

refuses to allow any lethal violence, ignoring the possibility for less extreme opposition to violence.

For the purposes of argument, it will be helpful to determine exactly what C.S. Lewis means by the word “pacifism.” The pacifist, in Lewis’ mind, is concerned with the total prevention of war and intentional killing. He writes during his description of moral intuition that “we should not even be discussing Pacifism if we did not know what war and killing meant.”² He also engages in a lengthy discussion on the hypothetical value of wars³ and considers the pacifist’s view to be that “If not the greatest evil, yet war is a great evil.”⁴ In all of these cases, the primary concern is war, specifically because it causes the intentional killing of human beings. Violence itself is not necessarily forbidden to the pacifist. Lewis acknowledges a general preference to avoid violence, writing “I admit the general proposition that the lesser violence done to B is always preferable to the greater, provided that it is equally efficient in restraining him.”⁵ He draws the line at killing, offering the potential pacifist view “that violence to B is lawful only if it stops short of killing, or else that killing of individuals is indeed lawful but the mass killing of a war is not.”⁶ Lewis rules out one “who claims to know on the grounds of immediate intuition that all killing of human beings is in all circumstances an absolute evil.”⁷ For C.S. Lewis, a “pacifist” is one who believes killing and war should always be avoided and has reached that conclusion through reason rather than basic moral intuition.

² Ibid., 68.

³ Ibid., 73.

⁴ Ibid., 78.

⁵ Ibid., 76.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 71.

One of Lewis' first points against pacifism is his belief that one cannot say without speculation that wars have had no positive impact. Lewis believes that this undermines the pacifist position because a pacifist cannot rely on the idea that wars have done only harm. He writes of his opinion,

“Wars do no good” involves the proposition that if the Greeks had yielded to Xerxes and the Romans to Hannibal, the course of history would have been perhaps better, but certainly no worse than it actually has been; that a Mediterranean world in which Carthaginian power succeeded Persian would have been at least as good and happy and as fruitful for all posterity as the actual Mediterranean world in which Roman power succeeded Greek. My point is not that such an opinion seems to me to be overwhelmingly improbable. My point is that both opinions are merely speculative; there is no conceivable way of convincing a man of either.⁸

Lewis is correct in that this opinion is only speculative. However, if that undermines an argument for pacifism, it must also undermine an argument against it. For Lewis' point to support his own argument, wars must have accomplished good. Although some good effects can be observed, such as the toppling of the Nazi regime and the end of Japanese Imperialism, ill effects are certainly also observed, as with atrocities like the Nanking Massacre or the Bataan Death March. In relying on the idea that wars may have been necessary, Lewis is himself merely speculating. Lewis writes, “Indeed it is doubtful whether the whole conception of ‘what would have happened’ – that is, of unrealized possibilities – is more than an imaginative technique for giving a vivid rhetorical account of what did happen.”⁹ Surely, though, that is exactly what Lewis is doing. In order to either support his argument against pacifism or argue against it, wars must be assumed to have done good. If Lewis is resting solely on historical fact, then he must also account for the impact of peaceful protests such as America's Civil Rights Movement. Likewise, he fails to note effect of satire in removing an enemy's mystique and reputation, such

⁸ Ibid., 73.

⁹ Ibid.

as Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* and its criticism of fascism or the exposure of the Ku Klux Klan by the radio drama *The Adventures of Superman*. Lewis could argue that he has no intent of supporting an argument against pacifism, only weakening an argument for it. However, his claim to weaken the argument for pacifism is dependent on what Lewis shows to be speculation. Lewis might also suggest that the effects of protest or satire have affected only social movements and not truly prevented war, but that is itself only speculation, as the social movements affected may well have become cause for war later.

Lewis believes that death which occurs during warfare is meaningful and justifiable. He writes on the nature of death in warfare:

Nor am I greatly moved by the fact that many of the individuals we strike down in war are innocent. That seems, in a way, to make war not worse but better. All men die, and most men miserably. That two soldiers on opposite sides, each believing his own country to be in the right, each at the moment when his selfishness is most in abeyance and his will to sacrifice in the ascendant, should kill [each] other in plain battle seems to me by no means one of the most terrible things in this very terrible world.¹⁰

I cannot parse what Lewis means here by "innocent." I should surely think that he is not advocating that the death of bystanders, children, and other noncombatants somehow makes war "better." Nor does it seem likely that innocence applies to soldiers who are ready and willing to kill and sacrifice themselves. The claim that most men die "miserably" seems likewise dubious. I, for one, would prefer to die peacefully of old age and in the company of friends than in the chaos of battle. Although many who die in war are fighters who are prepared to die for their cause, many more are conscripts forced into action, to say nothing of civilians harmed by crossfire and collateral damage. That all soldiers are prepared to die for their cause and others suffer nothing for their loss is a very difficult claim to believe. Lewis might state that the loss

¹⁰ Ibid., 77-78.

suffered in war is irrelevant to the fact that some of that loss is meaningful and willing. He could claim that he is not attempting to show that there is no terrible loss in war, but only that it is less terrible than other forms of loss. However, I do not believe, as Lewis claims, one must prove that death is the greatest evil, only that it is a greater evil than the cause of that death. Wars fought over fundamental ideology may justify such sacrifices, but border disputes don't make for nearly as dramatic a cause to die defending. I believe Lewis is showing his personal bias. In making poorly supported claims about the misery of most deaths and the readiness of war's participants to sacrifice themselves, Lewis is unnecessarily glorifying war.

The primary thrust of Lewis' argument is the fact that he considers war and killing to be entirely inevitable. With regards to abolishing war, Lewis writes,

Only liberal societies tolerate Pacifists. In the liberal society, the number of Pacifists will either be large enough to cripple the state as a belligerent, or not. If not, you have done nothing. If it is large enough, then you have handed over the state which does tolerate Pacifists to its totalitarian neighbor who does not. Pacifism of this kind is taking the straight road to a world in which there will be no Pacifists.¹¹

Lewis has already determined that there will always exist some group with sufficient force to violently impose its will on another group and that this will invariably occur. He has rightly observed that increasing the number of pacifists such that all war is abolished would be very difficult, writing, "This seems to me wild work."¹² However, I do not believe he makes a compelling case that such work is impossibly difficult. Lewis' assessment is sound if one assumes the existence of a world where so many nations are totalitarian that they may suppress all pacifist-tolerant nations. However, I doubt that one, two, or even ten militant nations could irreversibly suppress an otherwise global pacifist movement. The logistical difficulties of

¹¹ Ibid., 78

¹² Ibid.

militantly controlling mass amounts of the human population within a pacifist world seem comparable to the logistical difficulties of creating such a society in the first place. Of course this is only speculative, but so is Lewis' position. There is no recorded precedent for a world almost entirely at peace. Such a world's ability or inability to defend itself peacefully from the occasional aggressor can only be speculative. Lewis might argue that because history is full of wars that then lead to other wars, speculation over wars is more accurate. Humanity has more reference material for a world at war than one at peace. For Lewis, war cannot be avoided, and some small good can only be done within the confines of inevitable warfare.

Indeed, I believe Lewis may be missing much of the point of pacifist actions. Lewis considers the best course in preventing an evil such as war to be one of mitigation and not elimination. Lewis writes,

I think the art of life consists in tackling each immediate evil as well as we can. To avert or postpone one particular war by wise policy or to render one particular campaign shorter by strength and skill or less terrible by mercy to the conquered and civilians is more useful than all the proposals for universal peace that have ever been made; just as the dentist who can stop one toothache has deserved better of humanity than all the men who think they have some scheme for producing a perfectly healthy race.¹³

The generalization he makes here seems too severe. Although there is great value in doing good within unfortunate circumstances, many of the great miseries of humanity have been resolved through ambition and skill. Lewis does not account for the progress made by community improvement. To borrow Lewis' own analogy, many advancements have been made in dental care that have led to an overall reduction in health problems. Although no one has advanced humanity to the point that teeth no longer decay, some people managed to invent anesthetic, develop new materials for tooth fillings, and even create the simple toothbrush. Each of these has

¹³ Ibid., 79-80

had lasting and significant effects on the spread of tooth decay. Although that decay may never be eliminated, continued progress may result in a world where it is so avoidable as to be irrelevant. Likewise, enough group efforts to prevent violence could eventually and considerably reduce the presence of violence globally. Lewis might argue that such a cumulative series of improvements would be different from a broad effort to eliminate a problem altogether. The results are the same, however. A world without widespread violence seems to be the final goal either way. Also, by placing a responsibility for a pacifist solution on those who dream of some perfect solution for eradicating violence, Lewis is putting responsibility on individuals rather than communities. One person's actions may never accomplish much, but mass numbers of people acting locally can have global effects. Granted, Lewis would likely reject this idea due to its requirement for the construction of a pacifist society, which he considers impossible.

Alternately, Lewis might claim that small efforts to mitigate the evil of war are fundamentally different from an effort to eliminate it altogether. In some ways, Lewis must be correct. What I fail to see, however, is the way in which pacifists cannot contribute to an overall goal of bringing about peace by approaching immediate evils and resolving them individually. Lewis does view a pacifist as intolerant of any killing, but does not make a strong case that a pacifist must want to eliminate all killing all at once. I would think the avoidance or shortening of wars would be an excellent way to work towards a state of nonviolence. The mitigation that Lewis praises would seem to advance the goals of pacifists. Although an extremist pacifist might sit at home philosophizing about an impossibly perfect end to all killing, another might be healing wounds or engaging in diplomacy. The doctor and the diplomat can share the exact same goal of putting an end to war even if their methodology is different from the extremist. I think Lewis is missing the fact that these actions stem from a desire for universal peace. If one's

brother is a chain smoker, one hopes he will stop smoking and live a long healthy life. If one cannot convince him to stop, one might have to settle for denying him a pack of cigarettes where possible. That doesn't mean the goal is only to stop him from smoking that one pack. One doesn't say, "Oh. He'll never stop smoking, so I give up. I'll let him have this pack; I guess he wants it." Pacifists try to reduce loss in war because of a belief that life is valuable and peace is good. People do not necessarily need to declare that since war is inevitable, it should be waged. Lewis might respond that engaging in war certainly is necessary if that war is inevitable. He could argue that if enough people were to act in a pacifist manner, they would render their national group incapable of winning a war and allow totalitarian aggressors to win. This is consistent with his belief that a number of pacifists within a society "will either be large enough to cripple the state as a belligerent, or not."¹⁴ Following from this binary view, there is indeed a danger to the cumulative effect of pacifism. However, that would assume only one side contained individuals who acted with pacifist interests. A community effort can not only bring about a majority pacifist stance; it can also undermine a belligerent stance.

C.S. Lewis makes many valid points in arguing against the tenability of pacifist beliefs. He might even find it possible to craft an argument which does stand in defiance of the core tenets of pacifism and those who believe them. Within the text he presents, however, Lewis builds an argument against a strawman with key points founded in speculation. He points out that the pacifist may only speculate as to a world bereft of war, but Lewis himself can only offer speculation, as no such world has yet existed. Lewis finds that death in warfare is more acceptable than other forms of death, a position which fails to consider the effects of death on those who are not active participants in warfare. Most of all, Lewis puts the burden of ending all

¹⁴ Ibid., 78.

warfare and killing upon the pacifist. His most fervent support of engaging actively in warfare is dependent on the claim that one cannot eradicate all warfare. Lewis is likely correct in that war may be forever inevitable. However, I do not believe that a pacifist must always seek to end all violent causes of human misery. In so completely dismissing extreme forms of pacifism, Lewis fails to address more pragmatic ways of practicing pacifist beliefs. A medic on the battlefield may believe that war is inevitable but still go on saving lives with the earnest goal of working for a peaceful existence. Lewis may have successfully defeated those who argue for a complete and uncompromising abolishment of all human-induced death, but I do not believe he has made a very strong case against people who want to work together to reduce violence and killing as much as is humanly possible. That may not be enough for Lewis. He demands that all pacifists must be absolute in their views. I do not think that is necessary, however. I would no more ask that than I would ask that all soldiers be intent on bringing their enemy to total extinction.

Bibliography

Clive Staples Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*. New York: HarperOne, 2001.