

What Is Pacifism? (An Ethical View)

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To be a pacifist (from the Latin *pax* “peace” and *ficus* “making,” “doing”) means to be against war, to be committed to peace. As an idea, pacifism has a rather ancient history. The first traces of pacifist thought can be found in the texts of Jainism, Taoism, early Christianity, and other ancient religious and philosophical worldviews. (For example, the Gospel of Matthew in the New Testament quotes Jesus as saying, “Blessed are the peacemakers...”) In modern times, pacifist views have become quite widespread, both in philosophy and other fields within the humanities, as well as in literature. In this article, first we will consider the pacifist ideas most commonly found in modern philosophical texts from the point of view of (deontological and consequentialist) ethics. Then we will look at some of the criticisms leveled against them and pacifism’s corresponding counterarguments.

The purpose of the article is to provide the reader with a relatively general overview of the topic from an ethical viewpoint.

Peace

As its name suggests, the main aim of pacifism is to call for and promote peace. Therefore, in order to understand what pacifism is, we must first examine the concept of peace. Although the term *peace* can be interpreted in many different ways, it is possible to distinguish two main conceptions here: *negative* peace and *positive* peace. Negative peace includes opposition to war and non-violence. Pacifism that deploys the concept of negative peace is viewed accordingly as a reaction against war and violence. It is no accident that “negative pacifists” tend to use negative expressions as slogans, such

as “no war,” “no violence,” etc.

Some pacifist authors, however, think that peace should not be presented only in terms of a negative concept; peace also encompasses just, peaceful, and harmonious interpersonal relations (see Galtung 1969, Boersema 2017). Some religious approaches within Buddhism go even further, asserting that peacefulness is in fact a peaceful state of mind (see Dalai Lama 1999, p. 202). Such thinkers are employing the concept of positive peace, because they conceive of peace not only as the absence of war and violence, but also as peaceful and harmonious relations, a peaceful state of mind, etc.

An important problem with the concept of positive peace is that it is very broad and vague. To discuss the concept of positive peace, we would first have to consider many other issues of social and political philosophy, including justice. Of course, that is very difficult to do in a short article, and here we will focus on negative peace. In addition, by focusing on positive peace, we would inevitably push non-violence, the cornerstone of peace, into the background, which we do not want to do, at least in this article.

The main types of pacifism: deontological and consequentialist

Philosophers speak of the existence of various types of pacifism (see Fiala 2018). Rather than discussing all of them in a short article, for the sake of brevity, let's focus on deontological and consequentialist pacifism, which are philosophically the most fundamental and can underlie many other distinctions.

It should be noted that this distinction corresponds to the division of ethical theories in philosophy into two major groups. Philosophers distinguish two groups of ethical theories – deontological and conventionalist, – the main difference being in the way behavior is assessed from a moral point of view – as right or wrong. According to deontological theories, right behavior is behavior that conforms to moral

principles or obligations, regardless of whether the outcome is bad or good (*deon* means “obligation,” “debt,” or “duty” in Greek). According to consequentialist theories, behavior is considered right or moral based on its outcome; if the outcome of a behavior is good, it was right, but if the outcome is bad, then the behavior was wrong (*consecutio* means “result” in Latin). For example, let’s say that A approaches an elderly person, B, in order to help them cross the road safely. According to the consequentialists, A’s behavior here is right because its outcome is good (at least usually); B was able to cross the road easily thanks to somebody’s help, which she could not have done on her own. According to the deontological approach, however, an assessment of A’s behavior is not dependent on its outcome. A’s behavior is correct here because he helped B based on the moral principle that “a person in need ought to be helped.”

The reason deontological pacifists oppose war is because it does not conform to ethical (or moral) principles. This group of pacifists believes that war violates the principle “it is not permissible to kill people,” which everyone is obliged to follow. On the other hand, in war human life is sacrificed in the service of other goals, which is also morally wrong according to pacifists. For example, Immanuel Kant, a famous philosopher with a deontological ethical theory, believed that human beings are ends in themselves and cannot be considered to be a means to a certain end. In war, on the contrary, people (soldiers) are used as instruments to capture new territories, to liberate occupied lands, etc. In their critique of war, pacifists particularly emphasize the point that the people who are thus used as instruments in war are massacred and maimed en masse, which deprives them of their right to life along with other rights.^{[\[1\]](#)}

Consequentialist pacifists also oppose war and violence, but they approach it differently. Many consequentialists believe that if we oppose war and violence as a *rule*, humanity will be

happier as a result. They think that the harmful *effects* of war outweigh its potential benefits. Interestingly, an analysis of the historical data provides support for this conclusion. As the outcomes of the wars of recent centuries show, it cannot be said unequivocally that those wars achieved the goals of the victors; the victims of those conflicts died largely in vain (see Bickerton 2011, xi).

To what extent do the pacifists' arguments hold up?

The pacifists' position has been criticized in several ways. Let's examine some of them here.

One of the most common criticisms is: *pacifists are afraid of war and therefore do not want to take up arms and fight*. Pacifists, however, seem to have no problem responding to this criticism. Pacifists assert that their position is based on ethical principles and, whether they are afraid or not, war and violence are still morally unacceptable. On the other hand, pacifists may add, to accuse someone of cowardice for their opinions is to rely on the *ad hominem* fallacy. In an *ad hominem* argument, a critic aims to criticize not the opinion of his opponent, but her personal qualities or the motives behind the opinion. For example, a response to a pacifist such as: "You're against war because you're afraid," is not a correct way of arguing against pacifism, but is rather an attack on the pacifist's personality. Here the critic does not consider *opposition to war* as a position and criticize it, but rather shifts the subject of debate to a personal quality of his opponent. But the opponent's personal qualities are irrelevant, because being afraid does not entail being wrong. Likewise, just because a person is brave and patriotic does not mean that their position is correct.

Some critics of pacifists believe that *in some cases war may be unavoidable*. According to some authors, war and violence may be permitted in order to protect human dignity and rights (see, for example, Anscombe 1981). Accordingly, a number of

political theories accept that states have a legitimate basis for the use of violence and war, in order to protect the rights of their citizens. However, pacifism seems to have an answer to this as well. Since violence and war contain rights violations, to use them to defend rights is to defend rights by violating them. In other words, pacifism considers this approach to be flawed, because it is a contradiction to defend rights by violating them.

Another criticism of pacifists is that *they consider it unnecessary to respond to violence against oneself*. Pacifists are often confronted with taunts like: "If you or your family were attacked, wouldn't you defend yourself?" In response to this question, pacifists' positions vary. Absolute pacifists, like Mahatma Gandhi, oppose violent resistance under any circumstances. Although they understand the difficulty of achieving this, they call on humanity to strive towards it as an ideal. Another group of pacifists, in response to the same question, prefers to differentiate between the right of an individual to defend themselves from violence and war. When defending oneself, the specific perpetrators of the violence are known, but it is difficult to determine whether the people killed or wounded in war were in fact responsible for the violence. For that reason, while it seems morally justified to respond to violence with violence in self-defense, it is difficult to justify killing people in wartime. In a war, many soldiers are forcibly conscripted and sent into battle; many of them may not support the war. Therefore, the moral justifiability of sending these people to their death or killing them remains at least an open question.

Consequentialist pacifists are not immune from criticism either. Their critics make the claim that *sometimes the outcome of a war is much better than the situation before* (for example, the defeat of fascism in World War II and the establishment of lasting peace in Europe can be described as good outcomes of war). However, it does not seem difficult for a pacifist to respond to this criticism either. A pacifist

could state that, in most cases, the damage caused by war is greater than the benefit it brings. The consequentialist pacifist, therefore, prefers to defend opposition to war as a *rule*. If the rule against war was accepted and followed by everyone, the future would see an increase in people's level of well-being and happiness; at least because the money spent on war and military industry could be spent on economic development, education, and for other social purposes; on the other hand, it would prevent damage to the environment and promote international stability; and most importantly, it would prevent mass killings and injuries.

In lieu of a conclusion

In this article, we examined pacifism from an ethical (deontological and consequentialist) point of view, looking at a number of criticisms of pacifists and their replies. In fact, many important questions may have been left out, because the goal of the article was to provide the reader with a relatively general overview of the topic. On the other hand, the opposing side may have its own counterarguments to the pacifists' responses to criticism, which are also difficult to discuss in detail in a small article.

Various aspects of pacifism have continued to be widely discussed in philosophical journals in recent years, and for those interested in the subject in more detail, we recommend consulting the reference work *The Routledge Handbook of Pacifism and Nonviolence*, edited by Andrew Fiala and published in 2017.

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^[1] This problem is even more stark in modern times. Since modern weapons have greater destructive power, there are more casualties, and the civilian population suffers more severely.

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