Pacifism and Ethical Theory

Abstract: Jan Narveson’s attack against pacifism as self-contradictory, published in Ethics over forty years ago, is one of the most reprinted on the topic and may have contributed to current attitudes toward pacifism. I review that attack. It is a serious misrepresentation. I give strong secular arguments for pacifism based on reading actual pacifists, arguments which could help counter the world’s currently increasing militarism. Then I diagnose problems in the discipline of ethics which foster such misconceived attacks.

For the last forty years, college students who do read about pacifism have been most likely to read one particular article. That is an attack against pacifism written by Jan Narveson and published in the journal Ethics in 1965. It is still being widely reprinted, but in point of fact readings about pacifism are not as common in texts as they once were. That too is probably in part a result of this particular article, one of the Sixties’ Greatest Hits (to find one bigger, we would have to go to Dylan or the Beatles—now there will be some interesting conversations in the Elysian Fields). The article is misleadingly entitled “Pacifism: A Philosophical Analysis,” as though the reader could expect an impartial survey of arguments pro and con, with perhaps some fine distinctions to help us better understand the concept at issue. Instead, the reader finds that a highly artificial version of pacifism is rapidly sketched out and then is claimed to be self-contradictory. That this view was taken seriously within philosophy, and still is being taken seriously in philosophy, and is being offered to undergraduates as a help for thinking through issues regarding war and pacifism, speaks reams about pathologies in the discipline, but I’ll avert my eyes from that for a while.

I have averted my eyes too long, though, from Narveson’s bad arguments and from the issue of pacifism. I feel my discipline and I, because of having averted our eyes, bear part of the blame for the world’s ignorance of crucial arguments for pacifism and for the current incoming tide of blood shed in war. I want to say what he says, point to problems with that, free current readers from supposing his view is relevant, and present a couple of the crucial secular arguments for pacifism. I’ll defend pacifism in a form which actually exists and which could help us now if we, the world of combatants and bystanders, would look at those arguments and then look around us at our wars. Along the way I make a case for distinguishing some issues which have been smushed together. I separate out two conspicuous bogus claims which have been used in attacks on pacifism, the first that pacifists must renounce the right of self-defense, and the second that pacifists must deny the possibility of a just war. I comment on philosophical theory’s inability to come to grips with pacifism, which I claim is a central case of an ethical position. Pacifism, then, is a test case for ethical theory and for ethics in general; inability to come to terms with pacifism marks a flaw, not in pacifism but in how philosophers have conceived the purpose of moral theory. Theorists have misidentified ethics with a quest for ethical theory, which they suppose exists to give decision procedures for justifying moral judgments or making moral choices. A brief consideration of how we would tell whether a theory succeeds, following Socrates’ lead in the the Euthyphro or the Meno, demonstrates that ultimate ethical authority can never reside in a theory, and that arguments regarding particular issues such as I provide here are the only possible basis for evaluating any theory. Hardly anything here, as you will see, is new.

Because I later accuse Narveson of misrepresenting his opponents, I need to be careful I do not misrepresent him.

This next section, then, rehearses Narveson’s arguments, a mix of good and interesting points, pathological irrelevancies, and profound misunderstanding of what is at issue. First, though, I’ll tell his arguments with a straight face, and at some length.

Jan Narveson, in “Pacifism: A Philosophical Analysis,” characterizes pacifism in the following way: Everybody believes the theory that violence is evil. Pacifism involves a further step—the belief that it is morally wrong, always, to use force to resist, punish, or prevent violence. The first belief, that violence is evil, is undoubtedly true, and pacifists subscribe to it, too, but if it is true, then, Narveson’s basic insight goes, the pacifist’s further belief is inconsistent with the first, and the whole position falls in on itself like a house of cards.

Narveson asks and answers a couple of questions meant to clarify the pacifist position. To the first, about how absolute a prohibition against violence or force the pacifist must be urging, (is holding a gun on someone who would otherwise commit a murder okay, given that you will not pull the trigger no matter what? if someone attacks you with her fists and you can pin her without hurting her, is that okay? is every little bit of force or threat of force or tolerance for force prohibited?) he answers that pacifism must be the absolute belief that all violence is wrong. To the second, to whom does the pacifist’s prohibition apply? (in particular, does it just apply to pacifists, or to everyone?), he argues that it turns out pacifism cannot just apply to pacifists, because if we ask who pacifists are, then the answer we get is circular, namely “Pacifists are those who believe that pacifists ought not to meet violence with force" and it is not only circular but false, since it is possible to believe that pacifists ought not meet violence with force without being one. This sort of reasoning shows you cannot come to have a duty just by coming to believe you have a duty. We get an infinite regress—Why does she have a duty? She believes she has a duty. Why does she believe that? Because she believes that she believes she has a duty, and so on.

The idea that whether or not you have a certain duty is up to you and what you believe, which has been said and believed and defended in more college examination books than all other absurd positions put together, is thus shown to be empty. The idea that whether or not you have a certain duty is up to you and how you believe comes to—there is no reason at all for claiming you have that duty. And so you don’t. There’s no reason to do the thing in question at all, at least so far. A pacifist has to have a different reason for being a pacifist than that he believes he is a pacifist, and the reason must be a morally relevant reason, not something about his own attitudes.

Pacifism, according to Narveson, has to be the principle that meeting violence with force is morally wrong, and while there may be overriding considerations or special circumstances, they must be morally relevant, and as strong as this principle. The principle itself (for reasons reminiscent of Kant’s distinction between prudential grounds and grounds of duty) must rest on moral grounds. If those grounds are just the
effects of pacifism, then we must do a careful empirical investigation of those effects, not just a logical investigation of the arguments for the principle. Pacifism justified only on the basis of its effects would then become a tactical recommendation rather than a moral principle, and its practicality may not be the same, say, if we are facing Nazis rather than British (unfeeling, cruel Nazis, I suppose, rather than sensitive and conscience-ridden Brits). In other words, if pacifism is a position endorsed because of its effects, then we want to investigate when and where it brings about those effects, and our endorsement will depend on how well it works, in which case we defend it for practical reasons rather than moral ones. On this view, the man who follows Gandhi and stands with his family in front of the enemy's cannons will have good reasons if he has sized up the enemy correctly and bad ones if he has sized them up incorrectly. And even if he has got it right—the enemy can't stand it, can't gun down any more defenseless people, gets sick and gives up the issue—it doesn't follow that the man with his family would be morally wrong to take up a gun in the contest. To get that result, we need more. We need something that would support the contention that the principle is right, regardless of whether its effects are good.

For Narveson, pacifism has to be a very strict business, with logic-tight, exceptionless rules. This has to do with his conception of moral principles, reminiscent of Kant's distinction between acting out of duty and acting out of prudence. To hold it as a moral principle rather than some kind of practical guide is to hold that fighting back is wrong, evil, not to be done. We are on this view mistaken in thinking that we have a right of self-defense or self-protection, and we have no right to punish criminals if it is done only to resist violence.

Narveson considers the possibility that the pacifist will think s/he has been misrepresented, since perhaps the pacifist is not against defending others (the defense to include the use of force), only the pacifist's self. This modified pacifism will not work, either—there is nothing about other persons which makes the defense of them more or less justifiable than our own. Allowing for the defense of anyone, even the most extremely defenseless, seems to allow something the pacifist must be very careful with, namely that there are sometimes cases where defense is proper and reasons for defense are sound. But if the pacifist allows this, he must be inconsistent, or his position evaporates. It comes to, one should not use force to resist violence except where justified. We need not be a pacifist to endorse this. For the pacifist to have a position at all, we need to view the position so that there is no right of self-defense and no right to defend anyone at all. And this must be a matter of moral principle, which to be consistent applies to us all and to all possible attempts to resist violence.

Pacifism on Narveson's view, then, has to be a strict and radical position if it is to be a position or principle at all. If we consider its purpose—its point—Narveson claims, the position thus clarified is inconsistent with its purpose. Narveson asks, What is the purpose of pacifism? What gets it going?—and claims that the answer is obvious. What makes a person a pacifist is opposition to violence. A pacifist is someone who is so opposed to violence that he will not use it even to defend himself or anyone else.

There are, Narveson urges on us, terrible problems with this. First of all, on a plain, commonsense level, opposition to something is thought of as real or strong partly on the basis of how much a person exerts himself to express that opposition. A person who claims to be unalterably opposed to something but who won't show his opposition in deeds is a hypocrite. Secondly, when the pacifist claims that violence is morally wrong, he must mean in part that whoever instigates the violence has no right to do that, and that whoever suffers because of the violence has a right not to suffer, a right not to be harmed. But the right not to have violence done to me can only mean that I have a right to be protected from that violence, and a right to protect myself from it. "A right just is a status justifying preventative action," according to Narveson. To say you have a right to X but that no one has any reason to prevent X being taken from you is self-contradictory. If violence is morally wrong, then those who suffer because of it have a right to prevent it. Sometimes it can be prevented by rational persuasion, but often it cannot, and the only way to exercise the right (the right to prevent violence) is to use force. Thus the whole point and purpose of pacifism is in conflict with its principle that violence may not be morally met with force. It falls in upon itself.

The right, on this story, to prevent violence is a right to use whatever means are necessary to keep it from occurring. If it can be prevented with persuasion, then that is all that is justified. If the threat of violence escalates to a threat of murder that cannot be prevented short of killing, then killing is justified. The existence of laws, police, and courts allows us to prevent the violation of our rights in most cases without resort to force. What they allow is the exercise of rights, which can mean nothing else but an entitlement to protection.

I now will criticize Narveson. I first say some smaller things about Narveson's arguments and particular claims. Then I talk more broadly about his target and the import of what he says—Should a pacifist (or anyone considering pacifism) take the argument above seriously?—is there any element of truth in it?

The first is perhaps very slight, or perhaps so serious that we have no time to deal with it here. General statements about facts or principles which we all accept ought to make us uneasy. In Narveson's case, he says or implies that all moral people believe violence is evil. It is clear he means all violence, and it seems he is only thinking of one kind of example, the kind where somebody, quite apparently a bad guy, pulls out a knife or other deadly weapon and threatens bodily harm to an innocent or good person. He's not thinking of psychotherapy patients beating on pillows, football games, the Lisbon earthquake, Hiroshima, Jesus driving the money changers out of the Temple, of Elmer Fudd or Arnold Schwarzenegger with a double-barreled but fully-automatic shotgun. He is not thinking of examples in which moral issues about violence arise—parents confronting the question of whether they are ever justified in spanking their children, the issues raised by Alice Miller's investigation of pre-World War II parenting manuals in Germany, police (or their review boards after the fact) confronting deadly force, or the issues for witnesses of violent crimes or we who evaluate those witnesses. A general statement about what we all believe about violence is worth little—at the very least we could look and see.

Next, Narveson never tells us why it is important that we spell out just how much violence is being prohibited. Is it okay to pin your attackers arms? Why is this question important? The answer is that it is not important at all, and the fact that Narveson thinks it is is one of the symptoms that he is talking about something different from what the pacifist is talking about. I'll come back to this.

I take it that Narveson's point about to whom moral prohibitions apply is perhaps sound, though stronger in a negative way than a positive way. That is, if we grant that there are such things as moral principles, then moral principles don't depend on people believing in them for us to claim they apply. And moral principles can't depend on support for reasons which are not morally relevant. But his commitment to the idea that moral principles are things that apply to all in all situations and to the idea that grounds based in duties are distinct from prudential grounds—these are live issues. Even leaving out R.M. Hare and P. Foot and hypothetical imperatives, moral principles are just the sort of thing for which counterexamples cause trouble. I invite the reader to try out a favorite moral principle and try to think of a case in which one would either
be justified in doing the thing it condemns or (sometimes this is the same thing) the principle does not apply though abstractly considered one expects it should. All it takes is imagination. Pulp fiction is probably generated this way. Try Murder Is Wrong. Or, since that's too easy, make it more specific: Premeditated Murder Of Your Mother Is Wrong. Then one can generate not pulp fiction but a Greek myth.

How seriously should a pacifist take all this, or someone considering becoming a pacifist? It may be that some pacifists do have a position such as Narveson attributes to them, and I suppose they should take his arguments seriously. Narveson's account of them, if it applies to anyone, shows their view is self-contradictory, and, alarmingly, more. Let me explain. It's curious that Narveson attributes to pacifism the point or purpose that he does, since it is a purpose or view he attributes to everybody. We all believe the theory (curious, misplaced word) that violence is wrong, but in the pacifist this becomes an engine that somehow jumps the tracks. The opposition to violence is something all moral people share. Not only that, it is what makes pacifism go. The trouble is, it doesn't go. This is Narveson's account. The effect of all this, then, is to show not only that the pacifist's view is self-contradictory, but that it is also stupid.

Like the Eight Warning Signals of Cancer, in philosophy there are perhaps half a dozen Warning Signals of Straw Man. One of them is when, say, A opposes B without working carefully with what some spokesman for B says. Another is when examples of what is at issue are lacking. A third is when A thinks certain questions are important when the writers for B have not dealt with them (such things as does a pacifist think it is okay to pin an attacker's arms without hurting the attacker.) And a fourth, a real tipoff, is when the view being opposed looks stupid. Now it is possible for these signs to be present when there is no straw man. Philosophers can be stupid. You can get someone's view right without quoting her. You can perhaps sometimes say true things without using examples. You can bring up neglected questions that should have been addressed. But straw man—misrepresenting your opponent and then easily knocking down the misrepresentation—is the most common fallacy among philosophers. Narveson has certainly committed the fallacy.

Consider some abbreviated examples of descriptions of pacifists, and then consider what Narveson would say about them. (Here's a hint: Narveson cannot recognize they are pacifists.) After that, we will consider some arguments pacifists have actually given for their positions. As a part of these examples which makes them relevant examples, let us suppose a context in which the U.S. is at war, with a selective service system and a draft like that we had during Vietnam and up until recently (and which is, as I write, being mentioned again as a possible remedy for the failure of our volunteer forces to meet recruitment targets as we wage war against Iraq). Compulsory military service of other kinds, such as our own during the Civil War or World Wars I or II, or such as other countries have, whether with provisions for conscientious objectors or not, will provide similar grounds, and will provide intelligibility for similar examples. A national debate over whether to go to war or over whether to institute compulsory military service also would make these examples relevant examples.

The first example is Jake. Jake is in jail. He refused to register for the draft because he thinks the armed forces, the Selective Service system, even the provisions for conscientious objectors, exist in order to allow the U.S. to wage war on other countries. Jake thinks that to participate at all in such a system requires that a person be morally bankrupt. He has perhaps some interest in presenting a public, dramatic example of opposition on moral grounds, but his main reasons are that to participate at all would be to give consent to the slaughter of innocent people on both sides of any war, and that it is important for him to distance himself from the war.

The second is Horace. Horace is in a hospital, where he is a conscientious objector doing civilian alternative service, making beds, carrying bedpans, cleaning up. He thinks the U.S. is a great country, and he is glad to be of service to it in some humble way, but his church forbids him to serve in the Armed Forces for grounds he doesn't understand very well, though he's sure his church is right. God forbids him, he thinks, to carry a gun for any nation in any war.

The third is Albert. Albert is in the Army, but as a conscientious objector medic. He has offered to help in the current war effort, but refused to carry a gun himself. He believes every person can have defensible reasons to serve or not, to be a soldier or not, but he is unwilling to take responsibility for shooting the enemy himself. He's willing to patch people up and help them live, even if that amounts to fixing them up so that they can go out to kill the enemy in the war. Though he has judgments about the morality of others killing people in combat, he also thinks his own mission of minimizing the insanity of war must not be a rationalization for staying away. That is, though he is against the war and against those who participate in it, he feels called to be a full participant as a spokesman for sanity in the midst of what he sees as insanity.

Now would Narveson say these people are pacifists? As I have set up the examples, he would say you can't tell yet, because they haven't had the essential test that pacifists must pass. That litmus test is, do they view force in opposition to violence as wrong? If they are of that view, then they are pacifists; if not, not.

Suppose we operationalize that litmus test and take each one of them, on different nights, out of jail, or the hospital, or Army, down to Rennie's tavern and we have some stranger walk up to him in the middle of the evening and slap him up aside the head, hard. And suppose the first night Jake kicks the stranger in the groin, and the next night Horace breaks the stranger's nose, and the third night Albert cuts the stranger with a knife. Narveson would think we have thereby shown that they are not pacifists. Is that true? (We pass over the fact that his grounds will be that they have contradicted the core belief required to be a pacifist, though he attributes a different contradiction as a necessary condition for being a pacifist.)

Is it true they are not pacifists? I think not. How would we decide? Let's think about what does make the pacifist go. Pacifism makes sense against a threat, not of violence, but of war. Pacifism is a position about war. It is(but not necessarily) the position that the killing that goes on in war is morally atrocious. There are many more kinds of pacifists than Jake, Horace, and Albert, but they are at least three and Narveson has not talked about any of them. They are not concerned about whether it would be okay to pin an attacker's arms, or whether the courts and police rest on a legitimate moral foundation, or whether people have the right of self-defense. Those are all bogus issues and beside the point. Pacifists need not even be committed to the view that killing people is always wrong. A pacifist need not be against capital punishment. The point has to do with war, with what war is and what being a soldier with a gun commits one to doing.

There are different versions of pacifism. Narveson said this and then set about to show there is just one. Let me try being a kind of pacifist Narveson has not laid a glove on. Another I won't discuss is the kind of pacifist whose basis is some religious claims.

Because of the history of this issue and my attempts to grapple with diagnosis, these arguments look like a small part of this paper. In fact, though, they are the heart. If they are good arguments, then there are huge mistakes being made by almost all those who currently wage war and those who tolerate them.

War is one of the places in our world in which

decisions are carried out by people other than those who made the decisions. Those decisions are partly decisions about who is to be killed or attempted to be killed. This is a very grave decision, no pun intended, and those who carry it out have more power than they have responsibility to use it well. Part of the responsibility in killing someone should be to ascertain that that someone deserves to (or, alternatively,) should be killed. You can't do this by looking down a rifle barrel at him or her, even if you can identify a uniform. What it would take to be able to tell that someone deserves to be killed is a difficult matter, but perhaps a good starting place would be an interview. If you can't get that, perhaps with some people you could tell that they deserve to be killed just by being introduced. If you had that possibility, then it would certainly be wrong to kill those to whom you had not been introduced, and perhaps a few of those to whom you had, since you might not be able to tell that they should be or deserve to be killed. Perhaps a program could be prepared, as before a basketball game, with a photo and a story about each man on each side. Then we could look them over and decide which ones should be shot. But introductions and an interview would clearly be better.

War is killing people without deciding which ones deserve to die. Some of those on both sides may in fact not deserve to die. To kill them, even if, maybe especially if, it is carrying out the decision of someone else, is a moral atrocity. It is no more defensible than it is to be a hired hit man.

This is part of the thinking behind writers such as A. J. Muste, whose insight that war is futile is partly based on the notion that those who suffer and die are no more deserving of their fate than those who win, and thus the cause of justice is not furthered but instead is harmed. This is one argument pacifists make often and it is not addressed by Narveson or by Anscombe or by those who defend the possibility of a just war. As a result, the widespread current ignorance of debate about just war and just war theory has an odd moral status—it raises issues about its purpose—does the debate or the resulting theory mainly serve as rationalization for warmongers? It becomes an urgent problem how we could make sure it does not, and it becomes strange that its defenders do not try. A main reason it is an urgent question is that, cut off from questions about who deserves to die and how one would decide, theories of just war also seem to be cut off from any morally defensible basis—and then become examples for Freud's dictum that we often believe, not on the basis of argument but on the basis of desire. We want to believe our favorite wars are or were just. The result is that we are well-advised not to much about those wars, and not to listen to historians who know about them. If war is hell, then just war theory is an attempt to theorize hell.

Besides these and the arguments about the economic futility of war put forward by Norman Angell, both (perhaps under the heading of War Doesn't Work) there are two other families of arguments Narveson does not touch. They look at armies and civilians on both sides, exclusive perhaps of their leaders.

The first are arguments based on what I'll call a Sympathetic Look at Them. Much of A.J. Muste's work, Thomas Hardy's "The Man He Killed," and some of the arguments in religious doctrine of groups such as the Nazarenes and Quakers have to do with, in Simone Weil's phrase, learning not to hate the enemy. Take a look at the common soldiers on the other side, not to speak of the civilians, and you see that they are like us in important respects. They, like us, are on the side they are as much because of where they happened to be brought up as because of righteousness or evil in their hearts, or arguments in their heads. They rely on their leaders to lead them well and true. They contain no more malevolence than we. Many of their interests are our own—money, family, friends, relief from hardship and bad sergeants. These are the ones we are out to kill. It is the Grand Illusion (not Norman Angell's phrase but its echo in the title of Renoir's film) necessary to war that they are the enemy. Such a belief is so wrong it becomes monstrous.

The second set of arguments may be found in places such as C.G. Jung's essay "Wotan," or hinted at in the exchange between Freud and Einstein printed sometimes as the book Why War? It is the mirror side of the above look, a Harder Look at Us. In war we idealize our own motives and deny their shadow side. We recast or see ourselves as the right side in a just war, and attribute the atrocities, the greed, and the sheeplike lack of thought to the other. This is a fable. We could test it by appeal to a battery of historians who are expert in any war we propose as just, if we could find historians who would not laugh at us. War relies on our using defense mechanisms of projection and denial. The result is that we not only fight against a fiction, we become a fiction.

While these sorts of arguments may embody some Christian values and perhaps some formulations of the arguments have been helped by Christian writers, they do not depend on a Christian point of view. Certainly they are not part of the point of view of either Miss Anscombe or those she attacks for a kind of sentimental and impractical idealism. We can grant her point that idealists have always made better warmongers than cynics, but the tone of voice of those I have invoked above is more often bitter or skeptical than it is optimistic. The claim that "I am not like them" can be seen as a lie by a pessimist more quickly than it can be seen by an idealist. That pride is a deadly sin for Karen Horney does not make her Christian; she as well as Jung advocates an owning-up-to our darker side, not beating it into submission after projecting it onto others.

Theological convictions, then, contra Stanley Hauerwas, do not have to be invoked historically to make pacifism intelligible. What makes pacifism intelligible is war, with its series of alienations: the alienation of the pilot and infantryman from the strategist; of the munitions worker from the victim; of the soldier's family from the enemy's family; of the soldier from his own faults and frailties. War divides the world into allies and enemies, in a situation where that division carries all the stakes of willingness to let live or sentence of death. War requires a central falsehood on both sides, false in every facet, that "we are not like them."

There is no connection, then, between Narveson's account of pacifists and the pacifists we find by reading or conversing with them. This is very strange. How could this have come about, and how in the world could a large contingent in the discipline of philosophy take Narveson's account to its breadth and not to its narrow sense of pacifism in a world increasingly intolerant of it is crucial and urgent. For my discipline, being able to succeed at this kind of problem, finding our way to make sense of moral positions which are well-grounded or finding our way to make sense of other philosophical positions which are well-grounded, is a related and urgent problem. What is it that got in our way here, and how can we do a better job? I wish to turn toward diagnosis, and comments on method.

Narveson's approach shows one of the dangers in mistaking the business of ethics as helping people decide what to do. The attempt to formulate a scheme which will serve to buttress some decision procedure for ordinary folk to use reduces ethics to a replacement for the Ten Commandments, at something like the fourth level of a video game. In Socrates' question to Euthyphro, roughly, is it good because the gods say so, or do the gods say so because it is good? we could replace the word "gods" with the word "ethics." The result is that we must throw out authority as a basis of ethics, including the authority of theory. We must base judgments on the only thing for which we should feel pity, namely arguments.

Narveson distinguishes between practical reasons and moral, as though moral must mean divorced from looking at effects. That begs an important question. In fact, a practical
reason can also be a moral one? (See A.E. Murphy's Carus Lectures and William E. Davie on acting prudently.)

The idea that rights are the controlling concepts or factors in the debate on whether violence is justified is part of the swamp of philosophical work on rights. Consider the debate, in the literature on pacifism, on the right of self-defense, and the philosophical search for a basis for that right. No one in that literature has looked for the basis for the right of self-defense in the place where non-philosophers actually do find it, namely in the answer by an innocent person to the question "Why did you kill him?" which is, "He was going to kill me." The search for more of a basis than this is fueled by a prejudice in favor of theory which blinds the theorist to that data of which the theory are supposed to be theories. As war gives intelligibility to pacifism, so atrocities and injustices call rights into existence. Rights are trouser-things, empty separate from the recognition of injustice. My suggestion is that the problems about rights stem from philosophers' history—from our trailing clouds of universalizability. That pacifism is a position about war and that pacifism is intelligible because of war may help us think about universalizability (as well as about utility and virtue). Our understanding when and where it is intelligible to refer to someone as a pacifist shows something of the limits of the idea of universalizing maxims of actions, since much of the recent literature about pacifism deals with problems of thinking of pacifists facing some other decision rather than the decisions to acquiesce in involvement in war. Considering defending yourself and your family against the most murderous squadron of the enemy just rounding the corner is not the same as considering enlisting as a soldier or submitting to a draft in the war effort; nor is defending yourself and/or your family against a murderously wacko intruder. To conflate acquiescence or help with war with any of those is to rob the pacifist of the situation which makes pacifism not only understandable but right—wars are fought far from the enlistment and involve many decisions, distinctions and lies before the weapons are sighted in or programmed.

Universalizability is one part of moral theory which could profitably be investigated by means of clear thinking about pacifism. Since pacifism is a position about war, the attempts to universalize pacifist maxims of action into nonwar settings, and the trouble made then for such things as the right of self-defense, can remind us about how seldom universalizability guides us (unless we are doing philosophy) in understanding moral positions. It appears as though understanding the position may be a necessary condition of understanding how it can be universalized, or what intelligibly can be said about universalizing the position. In particular it may be a mistake to universalize beyond the situations in which the position is at issue. That means it may be a mistake to try to universalize this kind of pacifism beyond those circumstances in which a war is in the offing or is being waged, and its tentacles are reaching out toward you and me.

We are witness here to philosophy divorcing itself as far as possible from wisdom, when we watch a philosopher try to dictate from a theoretical stance what a moral position has to be and then bring his work to bear on a moral position in order to test, not his theory, but the moral position. Pacifism marks a way for us to test the adequacy of moral theory, and in that test Narveson's theory does not get out the gate, does not see the gate.

Narveson seems to operate from a stance I hope is outdated, the stance of a philosopher who supposes that ethics exists in order to help people make decisions about how to live their lives, and further supposes that the philosopher working in ethics has the job of providing a procedure to people by means of which they may make moral choices. This impoverishes ethics in several ways. It makes some of the grand problems in ethics into stumbling blocks, things to get around or to solve, rather than occasions for prompting us toward our own humility. It intellectualizes virtue, and blinds us to the goodness of virtuous but nonacademic people. It tends to make us abstract, and to neglect the particular issues of daily moral life. It lifts up the illusory hope that there is a trail which will give us a standard of proper decisions separate from the living moral arguments, even though it is unclear that we need the relevant arguments replaced with any theory at all. Finally it ignores the criterion argument, that the test whether any such proposal is valuable is whether it helps us to better process the particular moral issues we work on, but we have to be able to tell what is better and what worse by thinking through issues separate from the proposed theory.
REFERENCES


10. "Trousers-words" is a term from J. L. Austin, explained in "A Plea for Excuses," *Philosophical Papers*, 3rd ed. J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock, (London: Oxford University Press: 1979), where the point is made that 'voluntarily' may cover or deny or take several opposites, none of which is 'involuntarily.' On making sense of the term "right to life," we could point out places such as Darfur in which people and peoples can arbitrarily and inexplicably be put to the machete—here is where the word has weight and bite.