

TECHNOLOGY

The Philosophy of the Technology of the Gun

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Does the old rallying cry "Guns don't kill people. People kill people" hold up to philosophical scrutiny?



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The tragic Colorado [Batman shooting](#) has prompted a wave of soul-searching. How do things like this happen? Over at *Wired*, David Dobbs gave a provocative answer in "[Batman Movies Don't Kill. But They're Friendly to the Concept.](#)" I suspect Dobbs's nuanced analysis about causality and responsibility won't sit well with everyone.

Dobbs questions the role of gun culture in steering "certain unhinged or deeply amoral people toward the sort of violence that has now become so routine that the entire thing seems scripted." But what about "normal" people? Yes, plenty of people carry guns without incident. Yes, proper gun training can go a long way. And, yes, there are significant cultural differences about how guns are used. But, perhaps overly simplistic assumptions about what technology is and who we are when we use it get in the way of us seeing how, to use Dobbs's theatrical metaphor, guns can give "stage directions."

Instrumentalist Conception of Technology

The commonsense view of technology is one that some philosophers call the instrumentalist conception. According to the instrumentalist conception, while the ends that technology can be applied to can be cognitively and morally significant, technology itself is value-neutral. Technology, in other words, is subservient to our beliefs and desires; it does not significantly constrain much less determine them. This view is famously touted in the National Rifle Association's maxim: "Guns don't kill people. People kill people."

The NRA maxim "Guns don't kill people. People kill people," captures the widely believed idea that the appropriate source to blame for a murder is the person who pulled the gun's trigger.

To be sure, this statement is more of a slogan than well-formulated argument. But even as a shorthand expression, it captures the widely believed idea that murder is wrong and the appropriate source to blame for committing murder is the person who pulled a gun's trigger. Indeed, the NRA's proposition is not unusual; it aptly expresses the folk psychology that underlies moral and legal norms.

The main idea, here, is that guns are neither animate nor supernatural beings; they cannot use coercion or possession to make a person shoot. By contrast, murderers should be held responsible for their actions because they can resolve conflict without resorting to violence, even during moments of intense passion. Furthermore, it would be absurd to incarcerate a firearm as punishment. Unlike people, guns cannot reflect on wrongdoing or be rehabilitated.

Beyond Instrumentalism: Gun Use

Taking on the instrumentalist conception of technology, Don Ihde, a leading philosopher of technology, claims that "the human-gun relation transforms the situation from any similar situation of a human without a gun." By focusing on what it is like for a flesh-and-blood human to actually be in possession of a gun, Ihde describes "lived experience" in a manner that reveals the NRA position to be but a partial grasp of a more complex situation. By equating firearm responsibility exclusively with human choice, the NRA claim abstracts away relevant considerations about how gun possession can affect one's sense of self and agency. In order to appreciate this point, it helps to consider the fundamental materiality of guns.

In principle, guns, like every technology, can be used in different ways to accomplish different goals. Guns can be tossed around like Frisbees. They can be used to dig through dirt like shovels, or mounted on top of a fireplace mantel, as aesthetic objects. They can even be integrated into cooking practices; gangster pancakes might make a tasty Sunday morning treat. But while all of these options remain physical possibilities, they are not likely to occur, at least not in a widespread manner with regularity. Such options are not practically viable because gun design itself embodies behavior-shaping values; its material composition indicates the preferred ends to which it "should" be used. Put in Ihde's parlance, while a gun's structure is "multistable" with respect to its possible uses across a myriad of contexts, a partially determined trajectory nevertheless constrains which possibilities are easy to pursue and which of the intermediate and difficult options are worth investing time and labor into.

A gun's excellence simply lies in its capacity to quickly fire bullets that can reliably pierce targets.

With respect to the trajectory at issue, guns were designed for the sole purpose of accomplishing radical and life-altering action at a distance with minimal physical exertion on the part of the shooter. Since a gun's mechanisms were built for the purpose

of releasing deadly projectiles outwards, it is difficult to imagine how one could realistically find utility in using a gun to pursue ends that do not require shooting bullets. For the most part, a gun's excellence simply lies in its capacity to quickly fire bullets that can reliably pierce targets. Using the butt of a gun to hammer the nail into a "Wanted" post--a common act in the old cowboy movies--is an exceptional use.

What the NRA position fails to convey, therefore, are the perceptual affordances offered by gun possession and the transformative consequences of yielding to these

affordances. To someone with a gun, the world readily takes on a distinct shape. It not only offers people, animals, and things to interact with, but also potential targets. Furthermore, gun possession makes it easy to be bold, even hotheaded. Physically weak, emotionally passive, and psychologically introverted people will all be inclined to experience shifts in demeanor. Like many other technologies, Ihde argues, guns mediate the human relation to the world through a dialectic in which aspects of experience are both "amplified" and "reduced". In this case, there is a reduction in the amount and intensity of environmental features that are perceived as dangerous, and a concomitant amplification in the amount and intensity of environmental features that are perceived as calling for the subject to respond with violence.

French philosopher Bruno Latour goes far as to depict the experience of possessing a gun as one that produces a different subject: "You are different with a gun in your hand; the gun is different with you holding it. You are another subject because you hold the gun; the gun is another object because it has entered into a relationship with you." While the idea that a gun-human combination can produce a new subject may seem extreme, it is actually an experience that people (with appropriate background assumptions) typically attest to, when responding to strong architectural configurations. When walking around such prestigious colleges as Harvard and the University of Chicago, it is easy to feel that one has suddenly become smarter. Likewise, museums and sites of religious worship can induce more than a momentary inclination towards reflection; they can allow one to view artistic and spiritual matters as a contemplative being.



[flickr/robertnelson](#)

The Brave One

The points about guns made by Ihde and Latour are poignantly explored in the 2007 film *The Brave One*. Unfortunately, many critics examined the film through a humanist lens, and bounded by its conceptual limitations, offered damning reviews. Many depicted the movie as a hyperbolic revenge film. All they saw was a gun blazing Jodie Foster playing a character named Erica Bain who copes with a violent assault (that kills her fiancé and leaves her in a three week coma) by moving through one scene after another of gratuitous vigilante violence, using an illicitly acquired 9mm handgun to settle scores and punish criminals that the law cannot touch. A stir was even caused by the following so-called "liberal" remarks that Foster made during an interview:

I don't believe that any gun should be in the hand of a thinking, feeling, breathing human being. Americans are by nature filled with rage-slash-fear. And guns are a huge part of our culture. I know I'm crazy because I'm only supposed to say that in Europe. But violence corrupts absolutely.

The critics failed to grasp a point that Foster herself underscored in numerous interviews. Despite its market-driven name, the film is not primarily about human virtues or vices. It does not try to discern whether there is an essential experience of bravery or cowardice, and the extent to which characters in the film personify such ideals. Rather, it is an existential meditation that centers on what Foster calls a "deeper and scarier" theme. Looking beyond the explicit plot and its correlative bursts of visually disturbing depictions of violence, makes it becomes possible to recognize that the film explores the anti-essentialist thesis that people are not unified subjects, but instead are beings with fluid and re-negotiable identities. Especially in the face of trauma, people can abandon old lives and start new ones. In the case at issue, Erica goes from being a woman who lives a relatively disembodied existence -- a radio host who collects the sounds of NY city by blending into its background; a minor celebrity who refuses an offer to appear on television by suggesting that she is more of a voice than a seductive face; and a lover who, at the beginning of the film, is visually contrasted with an athletic looking, long-haired, male-nurse fiancé -- to a someone who can kill in cold blood without experiencing the quintessential physical sign of remorse, shaky hands.

By depicting Erica's metamorphosis as a shift away from disembodiment that is brought by means other than consciousness-raising or personal affirmation, *The Brave One* challenges the instrumental conception of technology. Erica's transformation is so explicitly and thoroughly dependent upon technological mediation that the audience is led to infer that without the gun, she would be radically debilitated by her beating; her fate would lie in becoming an apartment-bound recluse.

Reflecting on the centrality of technological mediation to the plot, Foster uses phenomenological language and tells the media that the gun "opens up a world" in which Erica is viscerally "materialized" and therein drawn to dangerous situations (e.g., late night trips to a convenience store and subway) where there is an increased likelihood of encountering violence. Since Erica enters these places because of a technologically induced desire, and not because she is deliberately seeking retribution, it may be fitting to consider the gun -as Latour might suggest, through his notion of "symmetry" -- one of the "actors" in the film.

To be sure, *The Brave One* is just a movie. It isn't a scientific study and it does feature a character who has come undone. But if philosophers like Ihde and Latour are right, we've got more in common with her than most are willing to admit. And this possibility ups Dobbs's already high metaphorical ante.

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