

THE MORALITY OF KILLING IN SELF-DEFENSE: A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Inspiration

For the first twenty years of my life, I believed not only that killing in self-defense was morally permissible but also that such defense was appropriate insofar as it was just. St. Augustine's *On Free Choice of the Will*, however, challenged my views on self-defense. In that work, Augustine and his interlocutor, Evodius, question "whether an attacking enemy or an ambushing murderer can be killed without any inordinate desire, for the sake of preserving one's life, liberty, or chastity."¹ After the two discuss the moral issues involved in the act of killing in self-defense, Evodius, though admitting that no human law condemns an individual for defending himself, asserts the following regarding attackers:

I don't blame the law that allows such people to be killed; but I can't think of any way to defend those who do the killing. . . . I suspect that they *are* condemned by a more

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¹See Augustine, St. *On Free Choice of the Will*. Trans. by Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), 8.

powerful, hidden law, if indeed there is nothing that is not governed by divine providence. How can they be free of sin in the eyes of the law, when they are defiled with human blood for the sake of things that ought to be held in contempt?²

Although Evodius recognizes the practicality of a law permitting individuals to kill in self-defense, he argues that it is impossible to take such action without violating God's law. Immediately, Evodius' argument made me wonder whether or not I fully understood the act of killing in self-defense. The more time I spent considering the topic, the more strongly I felt that the morality of such action was much more complex than I had originally imagined. Although most everyone I knew held that it was permissible for individuals to kill in self-defense, I doubted that they had ever seriously considered the question. Consequently, I took it upon myself to delve deeper into the issue.

The Project

My investigation is directed at understanding the morality of killing in self-defense from a Christian perspective. I examined the works of numerous Christian authors and a broad range of perspectives, including those of St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Augustine, Stanley Hauerwas, Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Ramsey, Leo Tolstoy, and John Howard Yoder. Although each of these authors affected the way I understood

² See Augustine, pg. 9.

the morality of killing in self-defense, I limit the following discussion to three authors, Aquinas, Augustine, and Ramsey, whose works address the issue at hand with particular clarity.

Although I suggest that I have investigated the morality of killing in self-defense from a Christian perspective, I do not do so to suggest that the arguments presented will appeal only to Christians. Instead, I do so to suggest that the arguments presented are made by Christians who have assumed certain basic Christian doctrines. That being said, I assume that God exists, that He is capable of acting in the world, that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, and that there is an afterlife in which all are judged. By doing so, I eliminate several variables that might otherwise make such an investigation cumbersome and allow myself to take a closer look at the more controversial questions involved in self-defense.

My discussion of the morality of killing in self-defense begins with an explication of several key Biblical passages and is followed by an evaluation of the arguments of Augustine, Aquinas, and Ramsey regarding the act in question. By comparing and contrasting the views of these three Christians ethicists, I am able to note the differences in their views that lead them to different conclusions.

Ultimately, I found that in the Old Testament, God provides the Hebrew people with an understanding of justice and permits individuals to kill in self-defense to preserve their lives. In the New Testament, however, humanity is called to “live for righteousness”³ by not resisting evildoers. This distinction between justice and righteousness also appears in the works of Augustine and Aquinas. Augustine, for example, describes the law that permits individuals to

kill highway robbers as being just while admitting that he “can’t think of any way to defend those who do the killing.”⁴ Similarly, Aquinas describes killing in self-defense as being lawful while suggesting that such action bars one from holy orders. Ramsey, unlike Augustine and Aquinas, does not address the question of justice but instead requires Christians to defend themselves whenever their failure to do so “would involve greater burdens or injury to others.”⁵

In the end, the morality of killing in self-defense rests on the morality of self-love. While none of the three individuals investigated argues that self-love is necessarily sinful, both Augustine and Ramsey suggest that one acts sinfully when his love of self motivates him to kill his attacker. Aquinas, on the other hand, argues that desire to preserve one’s own life is a precept of the natural law and therefore an end worth pursuing even when certain evils result. By looking to the New Testament, one is able to adjudicate between these two positions and conclude that, while it may be just to kill in self-defense, such action is not righteous. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus commands the crowd, saying, “Do not resist an evildoer,”⁶ and obedience to such a call requires that Christians act self-sacrificially, in the same way the disciples are asked by Jesus to “deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”⁷

³ See *New Revised Standard Version Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 2282. 1 Peter 2:24

⁴ See Augustine, pg. 9.

⁵ See Ramsey, Paul. *Basic Christian Ethics* (Louisville: Westminster, 1993), 177.

⁶ See *NRSV*, pg. 1867. Matthew 5: 39

⁷ See *NRSV*, pg. 1888. Matthew 16:24

CHAPTER 2

THE BIBLE

The Old Testament

For Christians, the Bible is the inspired word of God, that medium through which special revelation, those truths that transcend nature, has been given to humanity. Therefore, Christians attempting to determine the morality of a particular action should take into consideration what the Bible says about that action. Accordingly, this investigation into the morality of killing in self-defense will begin precisely there.

In the beginning of Genesis, the Bible presents its reader with an account of creation. In that account, God describes creation as being “good”⁸ and in doing so provides the basis for the assertion that everything God creates is good. Later Augustine and Aquinas will use this idea to give an account of evil. Man, though good insofar as he was created by God, eventually becomes sinful when Adam and Eve disobey God’s command by eating the fruit of “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.”⁹ Adam and Eve are punished for their act, and their offspring are burdened with original sin, which passes from generation to generation.

Cain, the firstborn of Adam and Eve, later slays his brother Abel out of jealousy. This, the first act of murder, would not be the last. While many men, like Cain, turned away from God, others remained faithful. Abraham, for example, trusted God and, as a result, was given descendants as numerous as the stars. Those descendants, though enslaved by the Egyptians, were later rescued by Moses, and it was then that God

provided them with the Ten Commandments, one of which dealt specifically with the question of taking the lives of others.

The second book of the Old Testament, Exodus, contains God’s directive, “You shall not murder.”¹⁰ This commandment, also translated “You shall not kill,” is the first of many verses that affect the Christian understanding of the morality of killing. Those who translate the Hebrew phrase to read “You shall not murder” argue that only certain types of killing are immoral, such as the premeditated taking of another’s life. Others, however, who translate the Hebrew phrase to read “You shall not kill,” argue that all killing is immoral. Although the debate that has resulted from this verse is interesting, it is important not to be consumed by it. In other places throughout the Old Testament God ordains killing, leading the reader of the Old Testament to believe that killing itself is not necessarily immoral.

Later on in Exodus, God gives Moses further instruction as to how to rule the Hebrews, stating, “If a thief is found breaking in, and is beaten to death, no bloodguilt is incurred; but if it happens after sunrise, bloodguilt is incurred.”¹¹ Here God asserts that individuals are permitted to kill robbers who enter their homes at night while at the same time declaring it unlawful for individuals to kill robbers who enter their homes during the day. The reason for this difference, though not obvious, is nevertheless quite reasonable.

All those who act unjustly, including robbers, may be punished for their injustice. The punishment for a given injustice, however, must be proportionate to the injustice committed. While death is a punishment proportionate to the act of murder, it is not a punishment proportionate to the act of

⁸ See *NRSV*, pg. 7. Genesis 1:31

⁹ See *NRSV*, pg. 8. Genesis 2:17

¹⁰ See *NRSV*, pg. 116. Exodus 20:16

¹¹ See *NRSV*, pg. 120. Exodus 22:2-3

thievery. One breaking into a home during the day is likely a thief who does not expect the family to be there. Therefore, it is unlikely such an individual intends to injure anyone. One breaking into a home at night, however, poses a different threat, for he likely expects the family to be asleep at home. The intentions of such an individual are much more difficult to discern, and consequently the Bible permits an individual to kill those who break into his home at night, in defense of himself and the members of his family. This passage goes a long way in legitimizing the act of killing in self-defense, even when it is unclear whether or not one's life has been attacked.

The New Testament

The Old Testament, though refraining from endorsing killing in self-defense, gives its reader the sense that killing in self-defense is lawful. That being said, the teachings of Jesus, God's Son, call into question the role of Old Testament law. Jesus' coming to Earth has multiple effects. On one hand, Jesus comes to Savior of the world by acting as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of man. On the other hand, Jesus comes "not to abolish but to fulfill"¹² the law and the prophets by instituting the Kingdom of God. It is with these dual considerations in mind that one should read the narrative of Jesus' life.

In the Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew 5-7, Jesus presents his most comprehensive treatment of ethics in the New Testament. Later on, in Luke 6, Jesus gives a sermon of similar character, though slightly less lengthy, called the Sermon on the Plain. Whether these two sermons are substantially different or merely different accounts of a single sermon, the fact that both appear in the New Testament either reinforces the sermon's significance or

suggests that Jesus often preached on the themes common to both accounts. Furthermore, insofar as the Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' most explicit treatment of ethics in the New Testament, it is likely the best passage from which to derive a Christian understanding of morality.

With respect to killing in self-defense, the most significant of Jesus' teachings comes when he states, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile."¹³ Here Jesus modifies the command God gave Moses in Leviticus where it is written, "Anyone who maims another shall suffer the same injury in return: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; the injury inflicted is the injury to be suffered."¹⁴ By altering this Old Testament law, Jesus replaces the Old Testament ethic based on revenge with a New Testament ethic based on nonresistance, discouraging individuals from seeking revenge or resisting those who unjustly steal from them.

When read alone, Jesus' command not to resist evildoers suggests there is no circumstances under which one may defend himself from an attacker. One must be extremely careful not to dismiss this command offhandedly. While one might want to dismiss it because it strikes the modern mind as unreasonable, he would have to explain why this command would have struck the ancient mind any differently. That being said, if one wants to dispute whether or not Jesus actually calls the members of crowd to practice nonresistance, then the best thing he could do would be

¹² See *NRSV*, pg. 1866. Matthew 5:17

¹³ See *NRSV*, pg. 1867. Matthew 5: 38-41

¹⁴ See *NRSV*, pg. 191. Leviticus 24:19-20

evaluate Jesus' statement in light of His examples.

In the first example Jesus gives, He instructs anyone who has been struck on the right cheek to turn his other cheek also. On one hand, this passage can be read as a general endorsement of nonresistance, an attempt to discourage individuals from defending themselves or taking revenge on those who injure them. On the other hand, this passage can be read as a denunciation of pride. Because it is not particularly painful to be struck on the cheek, such an action may be intended to dishonor rather than injure the victim. Thus, Jesus may use this example to encourage his audience to be humble despite the dishonor they incur for obeying Christ. The problem with this second interpretation, however, is that it seems unrelated to the general statement that precedes it. Jesus says, "Do not resist an evildoer," suggesting that His message is one of nonresistance, not humility.

One might, therefore, ask whether or not such a teaching discourages those who are attacked from using deadly force against their attackers. It could be argued that there is a great difference between instructing one to turn his cheek in anticipation of being struck and commanding one to sacrifice his life to an attacker. First, there is a significant difference between the pain incurred by one who is struck on the cheek and the pain incurred by one who is killed. Second, there is a significant difference between the degree of liberty lost by one who is struck on the cheek and the degree of liberty lost by one who is killed. Although these differences are substantial, nowhere in the Bible does Jesus emphasize the importance of avoiding harm or preserving liberty. That is not to say that the avoidance of harm and the preservation of liberty are not goods to be pursued, but it is to say that they are less important than nonresistance. If there is no afterlife, then death is the worst of all evils

because its effects are irreversible. If there is an afterlife, however, as Christians suggest, then death is merely the temporary cessation of one's physical existence. By discouraging individuals from resisting evildoers, Jesus directs the focus of his listeners away from temporal concerns and toward eternal ones, for the eternal state of one's soul is more important than one's temporal well-being. Eventually Augustine will develop this line of argumentation, condemning those who treasure things that can be lost against their will.¹⁵

In the second example, Jesus encourages a man who is sued for his coat to offer the plaintiff his cloak as well. Again, this passage can be read several different ways. First, Jesus could be deemphasizing the importance of personal possessions. Second, He could be discouraging people from going to court. Third, and most likely, Jesus is suggesting that if an individual sincerely desires a coat belonging to one of His listeners, then his listener should be willing to surrender it.

In the third example, Jesus directs those who are asked to accompany someone else for a mile, to do so for two. During Jesus' lifetime, citizens, when asked, were required to escort the soldiers of the occupying Roman army for at least a mile of their journey. That being the case, this passage might be Jesus' way of endorsing a very specific behavior, namely the willingness on behalf of Christians to accompany Roman soldiers two miles rather than one. What is more probable, however, is that Jesus gives this example to encourage his audience to go above and beyond what is required of them.

The common thread running through each of these scenarios is that of sacrifice. Jesus recognizes the standard of justice as "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth"

¹⁵ See Augustine, pg. 8.

but calls his listeners to a loftier goal, nonresistance. In effect, Jesus attempts to redirect the mindset of his listeners. Rather than telling them what they may do, Jesus advises them as to what they should do. The individual struck on the cheek is not to avenge himself by striking his attacker but should turn his other cheek in submission. The individual who is sued for his coat should not go to court over it. Instead, he is to offer the petitioner his cloak as well, gladly surrendering what is rightfully his. The individual who is asked to walk a mile should not stop after a mile but willingly walk two. The question one must then consider is not whether or not he may kill in self-defense but whether or not the type of sacrifice Jesus describes in these three examples should be performed with respect to one's life.

There are several other places in the New Testament where Jesus suggests that individuals should be willing to lay down their lives on behalf of others. One example comes in John 15:12-13 where Jesus says, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."¹⁶ Here Jesus calls individuals to love one another as He has loved them. He then suggests that the greatest expression of love is revealed in the laying down of one's life for a friend. These things having been said, the question becomes whether or not an attacker should receive the same treatment as a friend.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven."¹⁷ Here Jesus calls his listeners to love their enemies and in so

doing suggests that enemies are to be loved in the same way that friends are to be loved. Later, in Romans, Paul writes, "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us."¹⁸ Here Paul describes the death of Jesus, the most significant death in the history of humanity, as a death for the ungodly. This verse indicates that Jesus' willingness to die on behalf of sinners was the most righteous of actions, and an example worth duplicating. That being said, however, Jesus' death provided sinners with something that no other individual's death can provide, namely the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Consequently, it is unclear whether or not Jesus' death on behalf of sinners is analogous to an individual's death on behalf of his attacker.

Although mere mortals cannot offer their attackers eternal life, Jesus nevertheless discourages them from resisting evildoers in his Sermon on the Mount. Later on in the New Testament, Peter gives an explanation as to why that is the case. He writes:

If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.... When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body

¹⁶ See *NRSV*, pg. 2043-2044. John 15:12-13

¹⁷ See *NRSV*, pg. 1867. Matthew 5:43-45

¹⁸ See *NRSV*, pg. 2122. Romans 5:6-8

on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness.¹⁹

Here Peter argues that Jesus should be the example for all Christians. Despite having been punished unjustly, Jesus willingly submitted to his punishment, refusing to call angels down from heaven to save Himself. Jesus' ethic is not based on the principle of justice but on the principle of love. While it would have been just for Jesus to save Himself from death on a cross, it was out of love that He sacrificed Himself for mankind. In death, Jesus enabled men to "live for righteousness," free from sin. By sacrificing oneself to his attacker, one provides his attacker with the same example Jesus provides all men. Although an individual's refusal to resist his attacker does not free his attacker from sin, it is an embodiment of the ethic described in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Furthermore, such action is in line with Jesus' command that individuals, "deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me"²⁰ if they want to become His disciples.

Jesus came to Earth to fulfill, not abolish, the laws of the Old Testament and in so doing replaced the Old Testament ethic based on justice with a new ethic based on love. Although this is a crucial difference between the Old and New Testaments, there is an additional difference between the two that is equally, if not more, important. This second difference between the Old and New Testaments is revealed in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount where He says, "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to

judgment."²¹ Here Jesus explains that an individual's morality is not based solely on his behavior. Instead, Jesus suggests that it is essential for an individual's emotions to be as pure as his actions. In doing so, Jesus encourages his listeners to change not only the way they behave but also the way they feel. This passage, consequently, increases the burden of those who are attacked. Not only should they sacrifice themselves to their attackers, but they must also avoid feeling anger toward their attackers in order to avoid judgment.

Given this Biblical framework, it is now time to see what conclusions St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, and Paul Ramsey draw from these scriptures regarding the morality of self-defense.

CHAPTER 3

ST. AUGUSTINE

The Text

In Through his interlocutor, Evodius, in his dialogue *On Free Choice of the Will*, St. Augustine argues that killing in self-defense, though permitted by human law, is condemned by "a more powerful, hidden law."²²

After establishing inordinate desire²³ as the cause of sin, Augustine asks Evodius the following, "[S]uppose a man kills someone, not out of cupidity for something that he desires to gain, but because he fears that some harm will come to himself. Would he be a murderer?"²⁴ Evodius maintains that such an individual would be a

¹⁹ See *NRSV*, pg. 2281-2282. 1 Peter 2:20-24

²⁰ See *NRSV*, pg. 1888. Matthew 16:24

²¹ See *NRSV*, pg. 1866. Matthew 5:21-22a

²² See Augustine, pg. 9.

²³ "Inordinate desire" is Williams' English translation of the Latin word "libido."

²⁴ See Augustine, pg. 6.

murderer because he is driven by an inordinate desire, the desire to live without fear. Augustine, however, points out that the desire to live without fear is not necessarily an inordinate one. “Consequently,” he suggests, “we will have to say that there is an instance of murder in which cupidity is not the driving force; and it will be false that inordinate desire is what drives all sins, to the extent that they are evil. Either that, or there will be an instance of murder that is not sinful.”²⁵

Evodius admits that there are certain instances in which murder is not sinful and provides examples of three such occasions. These examples include times when “a soldier kills an enemy,” when “a judge or his representative puts a criminal to death,” and when “a weapon accidentally slips out of someone’s hand without his willing or noticing it.”²⁶ Evodius is then asked by Augustine whether or not “someone who kills his master because he fears severe torture”²⁷ should be considered a murderer. Although Evodius initially asserts that such an individual is a murderer, Augustine slowly persuades him otherwise. When Evodius admits that he can no longer defend the slave’s action, Augustine explains:

You have let yourself be persuaded that this great crime should go unpunished, without considering whether the slave wanted to be free of the fear of his master in order to satisfy his own inordinate desires. All wicked people, just like good people, desire to live without fear. The difference is that the good, in desiring this, turn their love away from things that cannot be possessed without the fear of losing them. The wicked, on the other hand, try to get

rid of anything that prevents them from enjoying such things securely.²⁸

Hearing this, Evodius claims that he now understands “inordinate desire” to be “the love of those things that one can lose against one’s will.”²⁹ That being established, Augustine proposes that they “discuss whether an attacking enemy or an ambushing murderer can be killed without any inordinate desire, for the sake of preserving one’s life, liberty, or chastity.”³⁰

Evodius asks, “How can I think that people are without inordinate desire when they fight fiercely for things that they can lose against their will?”³¹ In reply, Augustine asks whether the law allowing a traveler to kill a highway robber is unjust or not. Evodius admits that it is good for the law allows lesser evils in order to protect against greater evils because he realizes that it is much better that “one who plots against another’s life be killed than one who is defending his own life.”³² Furthermore, he explains that because the purpose of the law as well as those who enact it is the protection of the people, neither the law nor those who enact it should be blamed for allowing self-defense. Nevertheless, Evodius asserts:

But as for those other men [who kill in self-defense], I do not see how they can be excused, even if the law itself is just. For the law does not force them to kill; it merely leaves that in their power. They are free not to kill anyone for those things which can be lost against their will, and which they should therefore not love. . . . I don’t blame the law that allows

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ See Augustine, pgs. 6-7.

²⁷ See Augustine, pg. 7.

²⁸ See Augustine, pgs. 7-8.

²⁹ See Augustine, pg. 8.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² See Augustine, pg. 8.

such people to be killed, but I can't think of any way to defend those who do the killing.³³

Here Evodius makes an important distinction between the appropriateness of the law that allows killing in self-defense and the appropriateness of one's act of killing in self-defense, suggesting that simply because the law permits a certain act does not necessarily make participation in that act moral. Augustine, however, requests that Evodius clarify this distinction by asking why Evodius feels the need to defend those whom no law condemns. In response, Evodius answers:

No law, perhaps, of those that are public and are read by human beings; but I suspect that they *are* condemned by a more powerful, hidden law, if indeed there is nothing that is not governed by divine providence. How can they be free of sin in the eyes of that law, when they are defiled with human blood for the sake of things that ought to be held in contempt? It seems to me, therefore, that the law written to govern the people rightly permits these killings and that divine providence avenges them. The law of the people merely institutes penalties sufficient for keeping the peace among ignorant human beings, and only to the extent that their actions can be regulated by human government. But those other faults deserve other penalties that I think Wisdom alone can repeal.³⁴

Augustine replies, "I praise and approve your distinction, for . . . it boldly aims at

lofty heights. You think that the law that is established to rule cities allows considerable leeway, leaving many things unpunished that divine providence avenges; and rightly so. And just because that law doesn't do everything, it doesn't follow that we should disapprove of what it does do."³⁵ In concluding their discussion, Augustine defends Evodius' distinction between human law and eternal law, which reflects the differences between the teachings of the Old and New Testaments. Whereas the Old Testament describes the tenets of human law, those laws that are to govern human relationships, the New Testament describes the tenets of eternal law, those behaviors that are to be adopted by men. Evodius argues and Augustine appears to agree that although the human law is to govern mankind, there is a greater law to which men are ultimately responsible.

Evodius' Argument

In the midst of the discussion between Augustine and Evodius is Evodius' argument against killing in self-defense. Were it presented in logically proper form, it might appear as follows:

1. The love of things that can be lost against one's will is inordinate desire.
2. One's life can be lost against his or her will.
3. Therefore, the love of one's life is an inordinate desire. [1,2]
4. Individuals who kill in self-defense do so because they love their lives.
5. Therefore, individuals who kill in self-defense act out of inordinate desire. [3,4]
6. It is sinful to act out of inordinate desire.

³³ See Augustine, pg. 9.

³⁴ See Augustine, pgs. 9-10.

³⁵ See Augustine, pg. 10.

7. Therefore, it is sinful to kill in self-defense. [5,6]

Logically, Evodius' argument is valid. Therefore, given the premises, the conclusion follows. It is not necessarily the case, however, that the premises are true. While the second, fourth, and sixth premises are relatively noncontroversial, the first premise is certainly disputable. That being said, if there is something to attack in Evodius' argument, it is the first premise. Is the love of something that can be lost against one's will necessarily inordinate desire?

Although it would be easy to persuade someone that it is possible to love life inordinately, it would be more difficult to persuade him or her that the love of life is necessarily inordinate. Throughout the Bible, life is presented as something that, as a gift from God, should be loved. For example, God's command not to kill and Jesus' command to love one's neighbor as oneself both suggest that life is to be loved. That being said, there are particular passages that suggest that life is not something that should be loved. According to John 12:25, for example, "Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life."³⁶ Although this verse initially seems to suggest that life should not be loved, a more careful reading discourages one from drawing such a conclusion. While on the one hand the verse encourages individuals to hate their lives in this world, it also suggests that their doing so is only appropriate insofar as it will give them everlasting life. The verse should therefore be read as a denunciation of temporal goods, not life in general.

This distinction between temporal goods and life is essential to the discussion at hand. In fact, Augustine draws attention to it through Evodius, who says, "Perhaps one might doubt whether life is somehow taken from the soul when the body is slain. But if it can be taken away, it is of little value; and if it cannot, there is nothing to fear."³⁷ Here Augustine notes that, although the body may be lost against one's will, the life of the soul is eternal. Therefore, attackers should not be resisted because the loss of that which they intend to destroy, the body, is not something that should be feared.

In Matthew 22, Jesus is asked which commandment is greatest, and in reply, He explains, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."³⁸ Augustine would argue that killing in self-defense is incompatible with the love of neighbor that Jesus commands. Regardless of the circumstances, one who kills in self-defense must love himself more than he loves his neighbor, inordinately desiring to preserve his own life more than he desires to preserve that of his attacker.

³⁶ See *NRSV*, pg. 2039. John 12:25. A similar passage appears in Luke 9:24. It reads, "For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it."

³⁷ See Augustine, pg. 9.

³⁸ See *NRSV*, pg. 1899. Matthew 22:37-40

CHAPTER 4

ST. THOMAS AQUINAS

The Morality of Actions

St. Thomas Aquinas wrote his *Summa Theologica* in an attempt to answer every theological question of his day, and as a result, he addresses issues of morality much more systematically than does Augustine in *On Free Choice of the Will*. After outlining the process by which the morality of actions should be evaluated, Aquinas argues that killing is lawful when performed in self-defense.

In the first several questions of Part I of the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas investigates the character of God and makes arguments to prove His existence. In Question 5, Aquinas discusses being and goodness, noting that being is prior to goodness insofar as things must have being prior to their having any other perfection. That being said, Aquinas asserts, “Goodness and being are really the same, and differ only in idea,”³⁹ and in doing so highlights the fact that all things are good insofar as they have being. In conclusion, Aquinas explains that, although things are good to the extent they have being, nothing is good simply unless it has ultimate perfection.

In Part I-II, Question 18, Aquinas provides four criteria by which to judge the morality of an action. In Article 1, Aquinas provides the first criterion by which the morality of an action is to be judged, namely according to its *being*. There Aquinas argues that actions are good insofar as they have being just as things are good insofar as they have being, as he suggested in Question

5 of Part I. Therefore, with respect to being, actions are either good or evil in the same way that things are either good or evil. He writes:

Thus the fullness of human being requires a compound of soul and body, having all the powers and instruments of knowledge and movement: wherefore if any man be lacking in any of these, he is lacking in something due to the fullness of his being. So that as much as he has of being, so much has he of goodness: while so far as he is lacking in the fullness of his being, so far is he lacking in goodness, and is said to be evil: thus a blind man is possessed of goodness inasmuch as he lives; and of evil, inasmuch as he lacks sight.⁴⁰

Aquinas believes both that there is a form proper to all things and that only those things that possess their proper form should be said to have the fullness of being. While people would typically speak of an individual, blind or otherwise, as having unqualified being, Aquinas contends that one has being only so long as he possesses the form proper to him.⁴¹ If a particular man lacks vision, a characteristic proper to human beings, then that individual should not be said to have unqualified being. Furthermore, because an individual lacks goodness to the same extent that he lacks being, a blind man should not be said to have unqualified goodness. Aquinas’ argument is that acts should be evaluated similarly, and should therefore be considered good insofar as they have being. The act

³⁹ See Aquinas, St. Thomas. *Summa Theologica*. Trans. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Christian Classics, 1948), 23. Pt. I, Q. 5, A. 1.

⁴⁰ See Aquinas, pg. 663. Pt. I-II, Q. 18, A. 1.

⁴¹ Although the words “being” and “existence” are often used interchangeably, the two are not synonymous for Aquinas.

of uprooting a weed, for example, is said to be good insofar as the weed is uprooted.

In Article 2, Aquinas provides the second criterion by which the morality of an action is to be judged, namely according to its *object*. The object of an action is that toward which the actor moves, and Aquinas explains that just as a natural thing takes its species from its form, an action takes its material species from its object. Furthermore, the material species of an act is that by which it derives its “primary goodness” or “primary evil,”⁴² and in order for the material species of an action to be good, its object must be in accordance with reason. Aquinas argues that the primary goodness in moral action is “*to make use of one’s own*” and the primary evil in moral action is “*to take what belongs to another.*”⁴³ Actions are, consequently, evaluated on whether they make use of what is their own or what belongs to another. While it is good to eat one’s own fruit, for example, it is evil to eat someone else’s fruit.

In Article 3, Aquinas provides the third criterion by which the morality of an action is to be judged, namely according to the *circumstances* surrounding it. Aquinas explains that the circumstances surrounding the performance of particular actions influence the extent to which they are good or evil. For example, Aquinas asserts that stealing, though immoral in and of itself, is particularly heinous when done inside of a church.⁴⁴ Aquinas recognizes that the circumstances surrounding an action are accidental, not essential features of that action. As a result, he is cautious not to place too much moral significance on an action’s circumstances. That being said, he writes, “For the plenitude of [an action’s] goodness does not consist wholly in its species, but also in certain additions which

accrue to it by reason of certain accidents: and such are its due circumstances. Wherefore if something be wanting that is requisite as a due circumstance the action will be evil.”⁴⁵ Here Aquinas preserves the importance of an action’s circumstances by suggesting that there are certain actions that are good only when performed under particular circumstances. For example, whereas it is good to eat when one needs nourishment, it is gluttonous to eat when one does not need nourishment.

In Article 4, Aquinas provides the fourth criterion by which the morality of an action is to be judged, namely according to its *end*. Aquinas explains that an action’s end is the purpose for which it is performed. If that purpose is good, then the action is said to be good with respect to its end. Likewise, if that purpose is evil, then the action is said to be evil with respect to its end. In this way cutting down trees, for example, is said to be good if its end is the production of paper but is said to be evil if its end is the destruction of the environment. Later on, in Article 6, Aquinas elaborates on the relationship between an action’s end and its goodness. Aquinas explains that all voluntary actions are made up of two components, the interior act of the will and the external act. He writes:

The end is properly the object of the interior act of the will: while the object of the external action, is that on which the action is brought to bear. Therefore just as the external action takes its species from the object on which it bears: so the interior act of the will takes its species from the end, as from its own proper object. Now that which is on the part of the will is formal in regard to that which is on the part of the external action: because the will

⁴² See Aquinas, pg. 664. Pt. I-II, Q. 18, A. 2.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ See Aquinas, pg. 670. Pt. I-II, Q. 18, A. 10.

⁴⁵ See Aquinas, pg. 664. Pt. I-II, Q. 18, A. 3.

uses the limbs to act as instruments; nor have external actions any measure of morality, save in so far as they are voluntary. Consequently the species of a human act is considered formally with regard to the end, but materially with regard to the object.⁴⁶

Whereas in Article 2 Aquinas emphasized the importance of the act's material species in determining its goodness, here he describes the act's formal species, its end, as that upon which its morality rests. Aquinas recognizes that "the object of the interior act of the will" instigates action, using the limbs as instruments. The morality of an act, therefore, depends on the intentions of he who acts, not the physical consequences of his action.

Aquinas believes that the morality of an action can be judged with respect to its being, object, circumstances, and end, and asserts, "[A]n action is not good simply, unless it is good in all those ways."⁴⁷ That being said, he recognizes that the morality of an action ultimately lies in its formal species and therefore argues that the act of killing in self-defense is lawful only so long as it is directed toward a good end.

Aquinas on Killing in Self-defense

In Part II-II, Question 64, Article 7 of the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas presents his argument for the lawfulness of killing in self-defense. He begins by quoting Exodus 22:2, writing, "*If a thief be found breaking into a house or undermining it, and be wounded so as to die; he that slew him shall not be guilty of blood.*"⁴⁸ Here Aquinas uses a particular biblical passage to point out the guiltlessness of individuals who kill not attackers but simple trespassers in self-

defense. This example, though more complex than Aquinas lets on,⁴⁹ does justify the use of deadly force against those who pose a threat to one's life. Aquinas emphasizes the fact that "The act of self-defense may have two effects, one is the saving of one's life, the other is the slaying of the aggressor."⁵⁰ Aquinas considers the "saving of one's life" to be good and the "slaying of the aggressor" to be evil. Although this makes the act of killing in self-defense good insofar as it is directed toward preserving one's life and evil insofar as it results in the death of one's attacker, Aquinas wants to differentiate between effects that are intended and those that are unintended. He writes, "Now moral acts take their species according to what is intended, and not according to what is beside the intention, since this is accidental."⁵¹ Here Aquinas employs what is known as the principle of double effect, a modern principle derived from his writings. This principle justifies certain actions that cause evil effects, provided they meet the following conditions: "(1) The action from which evil results is good or indifferent in itself. ... (2) The intention of the agent is upright. ... (3) The evil effect must be equally immediate causally with the good effect. ... (4) There must be a proportionately grave reason for allowing the evil to occur."⁵² Therefore, according to Aquinas, killing is lawful as long as it is nothing more than a

⁴⁶ See Aquinas, pgs. 666-667. Pt. I-II, Q. 18, A. 6.

⁴⁷ See Aquinas, pg. 665. Pt. I-II, Q. 18, A. 4.

⁴⁸ See Aquinas, pg. 1465. Pt. II-II, Q. 64, A. 7.

⁴⁹ This verse was discussed in depth earlier. Because Aquinas does not provide the context for this verse, it appears as though God permits individuals to kill anyone who breaks into their homes. In context, however, the verse permits individuals to kill only those thieves who, by breaking into a home, endanger the lives of its inhabitants.

⁵⁰ See Aquinas, pg. 1465. Pt. II-II, Q. 64, A. 7.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² See *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics*. Ed. by James F. Childress and John Macquarrie (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 162.

foreseen consequence of an action directed toward the preservation of life.

Aquinas' argument, were it presented in logically proper form, might appear as follows:

1. Self-defense is an action.
2. The effects of a particular action are either intended or accidental.
3. Therefore, the effects of self-defense are either intended or accidental. [1,2]
4. The act of self-defense in question has two effects, the pre-serving of one's life and the death of one's attacker.
5. By definition, the preservation of one's life is an intended effect of self-defense.
6. If an effect of self-defense is not intended, then it is accidental. [3]
7. The death of one's attacker is not an intended effect of the act of self-defense.
8. Therefore, the death of one's attacker is an accidental effect of the act of self-defense. [6,7]
9. The morality of a particular action is affected by the morality of its intended effects.
10. Therefore, the morality of self-defense is affected by the morality of its intended effects. [1,9]
11. Therefore, the morality of self-defense is affected by the morality of preserving one's life. [5,10]
12. The morality of a particular action is not affected by the morality of its accidental effects.
13. Therefore, the morality of self-defense is not affected by the morality of its accidental effects. [1,12]
14. Therefore, the morality of self-defense is not affected by the

morality of the death of one's attacker. [8,13]

15. Therefore, the morality of self-defense is based solely on the morality of preserving one's life. [4,11,14]
16. Those acts that are in accordance with the precepts of natural law are lawful.
17. The preservation of life is a precept of the natural law.
18. Therefore, the preservation of life is lawful. [16,17]
19. Therefore, self-defense is lawful. [15,18]

Aquinas' argument for the lawfulness of self-defense relies upon the legitimacy of the doctrine of double effect, his suggestion that actions are moral as long as their intended effects are good, as well as his assertion that the performance of actions in accordance with the precepts of the natural law are lawful. Aquinas argument is, therefore, sound as long as he is right on both of those points.

After his initial discussion permitting individuals to kill in self-defense, Aquinas provides several stipulations on such action. Aquinas first stipulates that it is unlawful for private individuals to kill intentionally. According to Aquinas, killing, though permissible when it is a mere consequence of one's defense, is impermissible when it serves as the end of one's action. That being said, Aquinas permits intentional killing by public officials whose duty it is to protect the common good. Aquinas writes, "But as it is unlawful to take a man's life, except for the public authority acting for the common good, as stated above (A. 3), it is not lawful for a man to intend killing a man in self-defense, except for such as have public authority . . . although even these sin if they be moved by private animosity."⁵³ Here

⁵³ See Aquinas, pg. 1465. Pt. II-II, Q. 64, A. 7.

Aquinas not only draws a distinction between private and public individuals but also draws a distinction between the intentions and motivations of those who kill others, stipulating that killing, even when performed by public officials, is unlawful when motivated by “private animosity.” Therefore, those who have been given public authority are permitted to kill anyone, provided their doing so is both directed toward the common good and properly motivated. Private individuals, however, may only kill attackers, but even then, they are prohibited from doing so intentionally or when improperly motivated.

Aquinas also stipulates that the amount of force that one uses to defend against an attacker must not be out of proportion to the threat posed by the attacker. Consequently, Aquinas does not permit killing in self-defense unless one’s failure to do so will result in his death. That being said, Aquinas immediately advises individuals not to be so afraid of killing attackers that they fail to protect themselves. He writes, “Nor is it necessary for salvation that a man omit the act of moderate self-defense in order to avoid killing the other man, since one is bound to take more care of one’s own life than of another’s.”⁵⁴ Aquinas’ assertion that “one is bound to take more care of one’s own life than of another’s” is significant, for if Aquinas is right about that, then his argument defending those who kill their attackers gains considerable strength. Although Aquinas never justifies this assertion directly, he does suggest, in Part I-II, Question 94, Article 2, that the law of nature inclining all living things to preserve themselves is a fundamental precept of the natural law. According to Aquinas, the natural law has several precepts. The first precept of the natural law is derived from

the natural inclination of all living things toward “the preservation of its own being.”⁵⁵ The second precept of the natural law is derived from the natural inclination of animals toward “sexual intercourse, education of offspring and so forth,”⁵⁶ and the third precept of the natural law is derived from the natural inclination of men “to know the truth about God, and live in society.”⁵⁷ For Aquinas, these precepts of the natural law should serve as regulatory for the way individuals live their lives. That being said, there remains some question as to why Aquinas’ assertion that “one is bound to take more care of one’s own life than of another’s” should override Jesus’ command that individuals love their neighbors as themselves. Aquinas would likely argue that man’s natural inclination to preserve his own life before preserving the lives of others is that which binds him to do so, but one must worry about using natural inclinations as the foundation for one’s understanding of morality. In spite of the worries Aquinas’ assertion may raise, his argument for the lawfulness of killing in self-defense is nevertheless formidable.

Killing

By placing the morality of actions in their ends, Aquinas suggests that the lawfulness of a particular action depends on the intentions of the individual performing it. Consequently, Aquinas does not give a definitive answer concerning the morality of killing in self-defense. The act of killing in self-defense can be seen from two distinct perspectives. Some see the act of killing one’s attacker as being separate from the preservation of one’s life. Others see the act of killing one’s attacker as being a mere byproduct of the preservation of one’s life.

⁵⁴ See Aquinas, pg. 1465. Pt. II-II, Q. 64, A. 7.

⁵⁵ See Aquinas, pg. 1009. Pt. I-II, Q. 94, A. 2.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

Therefore, evaluate the morality of each of these mindsets may prove beneficial in distinguishing the moral differences between them.

As Aquinas explains, there are four characteristics of any action, the action's being, object, circumstances, and end. For those who see the act of killing one's attacker to be separate from the preservation of one's life, the *being* of the act in question is killing. According to Aquinas, the extent to which an act affects change is the extent to which it has being. Furthermore, the extent to which an act has being determines the extent to which it is good. Although there are particular individuals and methods that kill more efficiently than others, the act of killing need not be performed with the greatest possible efficiency in order to be considered good with regard to being, and therefore killing is good with regard to being as long as it affects change.

The *object* of the act in question is that which is killed, namely another person. Because, as Aquinas explains, the action's object gives the action its material species, the material species of the act in question is the killing of another person. Because killing is the act of destroying life and its object is the life of another person, the act of killing another person is evil, for in doing so one "*take[s] what belongs to another.*"⁵⁸ Nevertheless, Aquinas does suggest that there are times when killing is lawful, for he writes, "[I]t is lawful to kill an evil doer in so far as it is directed to the welfare of the whole community."⁵⁹ Therefore, despite the fact that the material species of the action at hand is evil, the action need not be evil as long as it is directed toward a good end such as "the welfare of the whole community."

The *circumstances* of an act are those conditions under which the act is performed. Aquinas' assertion that "*it is*

lawful to repel force by force" suggests that two conditions are necessary if one is to perform the act in question, killing another person, lawfully. First, in order for one to defend himself lawfully, he must be either threatened or attacked. Second, in order for one to kill his attacker lawfully, his life must be in danger, for Aquinas writes, "And yet, though proceeding from a good intention, an act may be rendered unlawful, if it be out of proportion to the end."⁶⁰

These things having been said, it is ultimately the formal cause of an act, its *end*, in which its morality rests. Those who see the killing of one's attacker as being separate from the preservation of one's life distinguish between the intention to kill one's attacker and the intention to preserve one's life. According to Aquinas, the intentional killing of another is unlawful, and therefore killing in self-defense immoral when separated from the preservation of life.

Self-Defense

For those who see the act of killing one's attacker as being a mere byproduct of the preservation of one's life, the *being* of the act in question is not killing but self-defense. The extent to which self-defense preserves being determines the extent to which it has being, and the extent to which self-defense has being determines the extent to which it is good. Although certain methods of defense are more efficient than others, the act of defense need not be performed with the greatest possible efficiency to be considered good with regard to being, and therefore self-defense is good with regard to being as long as it preserves being.

The *object* of the act in question is that which defended, namely oneself. Because the action's object gives the action its material species, the material species of

⁵⁸ See Aquinas, pg. 664. Pt. I-II, Q. 18, A. 2.

⁵⁹ See Aquinas, pg. 1461. Pt. II-II, Q. 64, A. 3.

⁶⁰ See Aquinas, pg. 1465. Pt. II-II, Q. 64, A. 7.

the act in question is self-defense. Because self-defense is the act of preserving life and its object is one's own life, the act of self-defense is good, for in doing so one preserves that which should be preserved.

The *circumstances* of an act are those conditions under which the act is performed. Unlike the act of killing, self-defense is lawful in all circumstances.

As has been suggested, however, it is ultimately the formal cause of an act, its *end*, in which its morality rests. The act of self-defense, Aquinas would argue, is a precept of the natural law and therefore a good worth performing. Furthermore, according to the principle of double effect, it may be performed in spite of the fact that it may bring about certain evils. As Aquinas suggests, "Nothing hinders one act from having two effects, only one of which is intended."⁶¹ Aquinas sees killing as a mere byproduct of one's intention to defend himself. Because, as Aquinas writes, "[M]oral acts take their species according to what is intended, and not according to what is beside the intention,"⁶² killing in self-defense is lawful as long as it is performed with the intention of preserving one's own life.

Clerics

Although Aquinas insists that it is lawful for private individuals to kill in self-defense as long as, in so doing, they do not intend the death of their attackers, he prohibits clerics from doing the same. In Question 64 Article 4, Aquinas provides two reasons why clerics should not kill evildoers. First, he suggest that clerics should not kill evildoers "because they are chosen for the ministry of the altar, whereon is represented the Passion of Christ slain *Who*

when he was struck did not strike (1 Pet. ii. 23). Therefore, it becomes not clerics to strike or kill: for ministers should imitate their master."⁶³ Here Aquinas argues that clerics are to follow the example of Jesus who was attacked but did not resist. He then explains that clerics should not kill evildoers "because clerics are entrusted with the ministry of the New Law, wherein no punishment of death or of bodily maiming is appointed: wherefore they should abstain from such things in order that they may be fitting ministers of the New Testament."⁶⁴ Here Aquinas argues that clerics are to follow the law of the New Testament, which forbids punishments of death or maiming. Both of these arguments are extremely compelling, but one must ask why they apply to clerics alone and not to Christians in general, let alone ordinary individuals. Are not all Christians called to obey the New Testament laws and "imitate their master?" In his Reply to Objection 3 of Question 64, Article 7, Aquinas explains that, although irregularity results when a cleric kills in self-defense, the act itself is not sinful. Therefore, killing in self-defense is not immoral despite the fact that the performance of such "permanently bars a man from holy orders" and "forbids the exercise of orders already received."⁶⁵

⁶¹ See Aquinas, pg. 1465. Pt. II-II, Q. 64, A. 7.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ See Aquinas, pg. 1462. Pt. II-II, Q. 64, A. 4.

⁶⁴ See Aquinas, pg. 1462. Pt. II-II, Q. 64, A. 4.

⁶⁵ See *Dictionary of Moral Theology*. Ed. by Pietro Palazzini. Trans. by Henry J. Yannone (London: Burns & Oates, 1962), 651.

CHAPTER 5

PAUL RAMSEY

Ramsey on Ambrose and Augustine

In *Basic Christian Ethics*, author Paul Ramsey opens his discussion of the issue of self-defense by comparing and contrasting his views to those of St. Ambrose and St. Augustine. He begins that evaluation by highlighting the fact that Ambrose and Augustine, though the first among the early church fathers to present Christian arguments for just war, remained steadfast in their prohibition of private self-defense. He also notes that while encouraging Christians to fight on behalf of others, Ambrose and Augustine forbid Christians from defending themselves from personal attacks. Ramsey defends these seemingly incompatible doctrines by asserting that they are quite complimentary insofar as nonresistant love is the highest Christian virtue.

In a famous passage from *The Duties of the Clergy*, Ambrose addresses a question posed by Cicero as to whether or not it is morally permissible for a wise man to preserve his own life by taking a plank from an ignorant sailor at the expense of that sailor's life. Ambrose argues that such action is not morally permissible, for individuals, he asserts, do not have the authority to compare the worth of their own lives with that of others. That being the case, Ambrose argues that it is unlawful for one to preserve his own life by taking from another something that is necessary for that individual's survival. At the same time, however, Ambrose encourages individuals to take up arms in defense of innocents as long as they, themselves, are not personally involved. In *On Free Choice of the Will*, Augustine explains why such a distinction should be made, arguing that when one is attacked,

self-love not only clouds one's judgment but also kindles selfish desires within him. Those selfish desires, in turn, prevent one from acting as an impartial judge between himself and his attacker. The judgments of those who are not involved in a particular dispute, however, are not impaired by selfish desires, and consequently, Augustine believes it that it is not merely permissible but obligatory for them to intervene in such disputes on the side of justice.

There quickly arises some question as to whether or not there is a significant difference between one's impartiality in cases of private defense and one's impartiality in cases of public defense. While it could be argued that there is not a significant difference between one's impartiality in these two cases, it would be difficult for anyone to prove that an individual can impartially judge a case in which he, himself, is involved. Ramsey explains that one's inability to arbitrate justly his own cases explains why disputes are adjudicated by judges, disinterested third parties less prone to errors in judgment.

Although Ramsey agrees with Ambrose and Augustine on that point and applauds them for making nonresistant love the guide for Christian action, Ramsey suggests that their position on self-defense is unnecessarily "extreme."⁶⁶ He explains:

A Christian does whatever love requires, and the possibility cannot be ruled out that on occasion defending himself may be a duty he owes to others. Whenever sacrificing himself, or in any degree failing to protect himself and his own, actually would involve greater burdens or injury to others, surely then a Christian should stick to his post whether he wants to or not. In such circumstances, self-protection

⁶⁶ See Ramsey, pg. 176.

becomes a duty, a form of neighbor-regarding love.⁶⁷

Ramsey argues, contrary to Ambrose and Augustine, that self-defense need not be immoral for Christians, suggesting that it is permissible, even necessary, for Christians to kill in self-defense when their doing so is properly motivated by love and directed at sparing others “burdens or injury.”

Ramsey’s Argument from Love

In contrast with Aquinas, who argues that it is immoral for a defendant to intend the death of his attacker, Ramsey suggests that there are certain circumstances in which it is necessary for one to intend his attacker’s death. Ramsey believes that it is morally obligatory for individuals to do whatever is necessary to preserve their own lives in cases where their deaths would burden those close to them, such as their wives or children. Ramsey’s argument may be summed up as follows:

1. A Christian does whatever love requires.
2. Love requires a Christian to protect himself whenever his failure to do so would involve greater burdens or injury to others.
3. Therefore, a Christian must protect himself whenever his failure to do so would involve greater burdens or injury to others. [1,2]
4. Self-protection is appropriate when “neighbor-regarding” and inappropriate when “self-defensive.”⁶⁸
5. Therefore, a Christian’s must protect himself out of “neighbor-regarding love” whenever his failure to do so

would involve greater burdens or injury to others. [3,4]

Although Ramsey’s argument is valid, one must be nervous about his second premise, which seems to hide utilitarianism under the guise of love.

Were Ramsey’s argument strictly utilitarian it would read, “Whenever one’s defending himself would result in greater good than his failing to protect himself, he must defend himself.” That is certainly not Ramsey’s argument, and therefore it would be inappropriate to suggest that he defends self-protection strictly on utilitarian grounds or that he employs any specifically utilitarian principles. Nevertheless, Ramsey’s argument does share two characteristics with utilitarianism. The first is Ramsey’s desire to limit the burdens or injuries of those close to the individual attacked. Whereas utilitarianism wants to maximize the good, Ramsey wants to minimize the bad. These two goals, though different, stem from similar inclinations. The second characteristic of Ramsey’s argument that is shared with utilitarianism is Ramsey’s assumption that future values are calculable. Whereas a utilitarian believes that he can determine what is best for a group of individuals, Ramsey believes that he can determine what is the least bad for a similar group. The problem with this assumption is that there are so many consequences of any particular action that determining the effects of any action prior to its performance is almost, if not completely, impossible. How it is that one who is attacked is to determine what burdens or injuries will come of his failure to protect himself? Need the individual who is attacked worry simply about the effects of his defense on those he knows personally, overlooking the effects of his defense on those who know the attacker, or is it necessary for him to consider such effects?

⁶⁷ See Ramsey, pgs. 176-177.

⁶⁸ See Ramsey, pg. 177.

Need the individual who is attacked compare the number of individuals that are dependent on him to the number of individuals dependent on the attacker in order to determine whether or not he should defend himself? Is the individual who is attacked required to sacrifice himself if he has a better life insurance policy than his attacker has? Should the individual who is attacked compare the psychological effects of self-sacrifice on his family to the psychological effects of self-defense on his attacker's family before deciding how to act? The fact that the answers to these questions are almost, if not completely, unknowable highlights the problem with a theory of defense that necessitates they be answered.

One's Responsibility to Others

Despite the impracticality of Ramsey's ethic, one must be careful not to miss his larger point. Ramsey's argument attacks the suggestion of Ambrose and Augustine that one cannot be a judge in his own case. In fact, Ramsey insists that individuals should judge their own cases because of the widespread impact their actions have on those around them. That being said, it is important to consider the extent to which individuals are responsible for the well-being of others.

According to Ramsey's argument, were a father to be under threat of death, he must kill his attacker not to protect himself but to protect his children at home. Ramsey is correct in suggesting that it is generally better for a father to be there for his children than for him not to be, for upon the death of their father, children often face many more difficulties than they would have faced otherwise. Although the death of one's father is traumatic, however, it need not be debilitating, and one should not rule out the possibility that the difficulties children face because of their father's death may actually

make the children stronger. Furthermore, Ramsey does not provide any evidence to suggest that fathers are necessarily responsible for preserving their lives, for he would likely be reluctant to blame fathers who are killed in automobile accidents or by deadly disease for failing to preserve themselves.

Christianity teaches and society acknowledges that by bringing a child into the world, parents, particularly fathers, take on a certain amount of responsibility. That responsibility takes two forms. First, fathers are to provide their children with material support such as food, shelter, and physical protection. Second, fathers are to provide their children with spiritual support such as encouragement and advice. Now, when a father dies, he becomes incapable of providing his child with spiritual support although it is possible that his savings or life-insurance policy capable of provide his child with material support. If the father is killed by an unforeseen act of nature, his failure to fulfill these responsibilities to his children is not considered blameworthy, for that which made him incapable of providing for his children was outside of his control. In other words, the father's actions did not directly result in his inability to provide for his children. If, however, the father kills himself or is killed by an act of nature that he should have anticipated, then his failure to provide for his children is blameworthy because he was capable of avoiding death. In other words, the father's behavior or failure to behave in a particular way makes him causally responsible for his inability to provide for his children. An example of such a scenario would be a case in which a father, after becoming intoxicated, drives his car into a tree. Another example would be a case in which a father develops a fatal disease as a result of overeating. In both of these instances, the father's death results from actions the effects of which were foreseeable, and he is therefore guilty of

endangering both his own life as well as the lives of his children.

A scenario in which a father is attacked is slightly different from the two examples above. On one hand, death at the hands of an attacker is unforeseen, for one cannot be expected to avoid being attacked unjustly. On the other hand, death at the hands of an attacker may be foreseen, for once one has been threatened, he is often capable of determining whether his life is in danger or not. It is, therefore, unclear whether or not a father is responsible for defending himself from an unforeseen attack, the consequences of which he does foresee.

Although fathers do seem to be responsible for preserving their own lives insofar as doing so allows them to continue providing both material and spiritual support for their children, fathers should not forget their responsibilities to others, including their attackers. In killing an attacker, a father not only preserve his own life so that he can continue to provide for his children but he also destroys the life of his attacker and thereby preventing his attacker from providing for any children he might have.

Furthermore, as was suggested earlier, it is possible that one's death would be better for his children than his survival would be. At least theoretically, there are certain fathers who treat their children so poorly that it might actually be better for them to sacrifice themselves than defend themselves. While providing for one's family is typically good, it is not necessarily good, for it is possible that by providing for one's family one allows his family members to become dependent upon him. Although dependence on another individual is not necessarily bad, it is possibly bad, and therefore it is possible that the death of one who provides for others could have a positive effect. Consequently, it is possible, at least theoretically, that a father could

manifest his love for his children by sacrificing himself to his attacker.

If men were truly capable of recognizing when it would be better for them to sacrifice themselves to their attackers than it would be for them to defend themselves and vice versa, then Ramsey's argument would prove useful. The problem, however, as Augustine suggests, is that nobody considers the possibility that by sacrificing himself to his attacker he might actually be doing that which is best. In other words, one always sees the preservation of his life as the best possible outcome of a deadly encounter with an attacker. That is not to suggest that the best possible outcome of such an encounter is always the preservation of the attacker, but it is to suggest that the best possible outcome of such an encounter could be the preservation of the attacker. That being the case, there are times when it could be better for the individual who is attacked to sacrifice his life than to defend it.

If Ramsey is to be praised for pointing out that those who are attacked are more responsible for the well-being of others than they are for their own well-being, he should be criticized for failing to outline what exactly those responsibilities are. Furthermore, his failure to comment on whether or not one's attacker is to be included in that group of people to whom one is responsible is also disappointing. By failing to explicitly include not only one's attacker but also those individuals close to one's attacker in that group of individuals to whom one is responsible, Ramsey suggests that individuals are more responsible for preserving the well-being of those they know than the well-being of those they do not know. This suggestion is actually quite similar to Aquinas' suggestion that individuals are more responsible for their own lives than the lives of their attackers, for both suggestions put more importance on

preserving those things that one knows than they put on preserving those things that one does not know.

All Things are Now Lawful

With his discussion of self-defense coming to a close, Ramsey provides an argument against contemporary pacifism in which he explains that aversion to bloodshed should not be the guiding principle of one's ethic. In conclusion, he claims, "[A]ll things are now permissible"⁶⁹ and asserts that love, at times, requires one to perform particularly repugnant tasks.

Ramsey begins his attack on contemporary pacifism by arguing that its adherents, in contrast to the early Christians, are no longer guided by love. He writes, "[B]oth the pacifism of early Christians and their shift over to resistance in the light of increasing responsibility were basically grounded in Christian love, while in contrast a good deal of contemporary pacifism is grounded in horror and revulsion at the sight of violence or bloodshed and in an ethic which values life above everything else."⁷⁰ Ramsey then suggests that contemporary pacifists have confused cruelty with sin, explaining:

Violence and bloodshed are no doubt horrifying, especially in destructive, total war, but the word "unlovely" has in Christian ethics a mainly spiritual not a mainly physical meaning. A selfish act is the most unlovely thing, and an unselfish motive may lead the Christian to perform necessary responsibilities which prove not so "nice" in terms of physical contamination.⁷¹

Ramsey concludes by laying out how a Christian should understand sin and condemns contemporary pacifists for distorting it. He asserts, "For a Christian outlook, sin came first into the world, death followed; sin, or the contrary of love, is the greatest evil from which men need to be delivered. ...For many pacifists, however, bloodshed and death are the worst evils, life a conditional or even the highest value which ought never to be violated."⁷²

Ramsey identifies the problem with contemporary pacifism to be its "horror and revulsion at the sight of violence and bloodshed" that leads its adherents to avoid altercation. Contemporary pacifists, Ramsey argues, see death as a great evil to be avoided at all costs. Ramsey appropriately asserts that love rather than life is the highest Christian virtue and consequently suggests that killing in self-defense is immoral when selfish. Although it is good that Ramsey attacks those contemporary pacifists motivated by "horror and revulsion at the sight of violence and bloodshed," it is necessarily the case that contemporary pacifists are motivated by that reasoning. Certainly, there are other reasons why individuals might choose to be pacifists.

Ramsey wraps up his discussion of self-defense by writing, "Participation in regrettable conflict falls among distasteful tasks which sometimes become imperative for Christian vocation. Only one thing is necessary: for love's sake it must be done. All things now are lawful, all things are now permitted, yet everything is required which Christian love requires, everything without a single exception."⁷³ Here Ramsey suggests that killing in self-defense, though unpleasant, is at times required of Christians as an act of love. Again, Ramsey argument sounds somewhat utilitarian, and his

⁶⁹ See Ramsey, pg. 184.

⁷⁰ See Ramsey, pg. 182.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ See Ramsey, pg. 184.

suggestion that “[a]ll things now are lawful”⁷⁴ begs the question. While one must admit that individuals should not avoid certain tasks simply because they are disgusting or repulsive, he need not admit that all things are lawful. Furthermore, victims of attack definitely should not attempt to justify killing in self-defense by appealing to the unpleasantness of such action.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

A Historical Account

In the Old Testament, God provides the Hebrews with laws to govern their behavior. Although it discourages killing, Old Testament law permits those who are attacked to take the lives of their attackers in self-defense. In the New Testament, however, Jesus presents a vision for human relationships radically different from that of the Old Testament. Jesus, having come to fulfill the Old Testament law, calls individuals not only to refrain from murdering their fellow human beings but also to avoid becoming angry with others. More importantly, at least for the discussion at hand, Jesus, in His Sermon on the Mount, commands the crowd, saying, “Do not resist an evildoer”⁷⁵ and encourages his listeners, when struck, to turn the other cheek. Although Jesus does explicitly forbid killing in self-defense, His life is marked by the refusal to use force against others and His requests that His disciples follow His example.

The early years of the Christian Church were marked pacifism, which only

began to wane once Christianity had become the official religion of the Roman Empire. Christians, having come into power, saw it as their duty not only to protect their existence but also to extend their influence. Consequently, individuals such as St. Ambrose and St. Augustine advanced just war doctrines while remaining insistent that private individuals avoid killing in self-defense. In *On Free Choice of the Will*, Augustine recognizes the legitimacy of the human law that allows individuals to kill in self-defense while simultaneously suggesting that those who do so are condemned by a higher law. Augustine argues that those who kill in self-defense are motivated by inordinate desire and are therefore guilty of sin. Almost a millennium later, Aquinas argues in his *Summa Theologica* that it is lawful for individuals to kill in self-defense, provided they do not intend the death of their attacker. Curiously, however, Aquinas declares it unlawful for clerics to kill in self-defense, asserting that all forms of killing conflict with the duty of such individuals to imitate Jesus. Finally, Paul Ramsey, in his book *Basic Christian Ethics*, requires Christians to protect themselves from attack in order to spare others unnecessary burdens or injuries while, at the same time, forbidding them from killing simply to preserve their own lives.

The Morality of Killing in Self-Defense

No matter what one might be inclined to conclude regarding the morality of killing in self-defense, it must be admitted that the issue is quite complex. Consequently, it is extremely difficult to find an appropriate answer for those who ask whether or not it is moral to do so. That being said, there are two things that one can point out to such individuals. First, one should note the difference between justice and righteousness, and second, one should

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ See *NRSV*, pg. 1867. Matthew 5:39

explain the role motivations and intentions play in the morality of action. Having called attention to these two points, one is able to explain why the act of killing in self-defense, though just, is righteous only when motivated by one's love of others.

When asked whether or not it is moral to kill in self-defense one should begin by noting the difference between justice and righteousness exemplified by the discrepancy between the ethical teachings of the Old Testament and the ethical teachings of the New Testament. Augustine draws attention to this difference by suggesting that the law prohibiting the act of killing in self-defense is just while simultaneously condemning those who perform such action. Aquinas also draws attention to the difference between justice and righteousness by arguing that killing in self-defense, though lawful for private individuals, is unlawful for clerics.

After noting the difference between justice and righteousness, one should explain that the morality of self-defense rests on the motivations and intentions of the individuals who perform such action, a principle that is common to each of the Christian writers investigated. Augustine, for example, argues that those who kill in self-defense are motivated by inordinate desire, which is evil, and consequently contends that such action is immoral. Similarly Aquinas, although he suggests that killing in self-defense may be moral, does so only insofar as the individuals performing such action intend the preservation of their own lives, which is good, not the death of their attackers, which is evil. Finally, there is Ramsey who, although requiring individuals to kill in certain circumstances, does so only when such action is motivated by "neighbor-regarding love,"⁷⁶ which is good, and intended to spare others from

"greater burdens or injury,"⁷⁷ which is also good.

After one has recognized the difference between justice and righteousness and understands that the morality of action, particularly killing in self-defense, depends on the motivations and intentions of the one performing it, he begins to realize that, although an individual may be justified in killing his attacker, such action is not necessarily righteous.

A Normative Ethic

The following is a list of questions that Augustine, Aquinas, and Ramsey would likely have one use to evaluate the morality of killing in self-defense. It also includes recommendations as to how one should act given his answers to them.

1. Who am I?
 - a. I am a public individual with the authority to kill evil doers.
 - I may kill those who threaten the common good.
 - b. I am a private individual.
 - Proceed to Question 2.
 - c. I am a cleric who has sworn a vow to imitate Jesus.
 - I should not kill in self-defense.
2. What situation am I in?
 - a. Have I been attacked?
 - i. No.
 - Proceed to Question 2b.
 - ii. Yes.
 - Proceed to Question 2c.
 - b. Have I been threatened?
 - i. No.
 - I may not kill in self-defense.
 - ii. Yes.
 - Proceed to Question 2c.
 - c. Is my life in danger?

⁷⁶ See Ramsey, pg. 177.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

- i. No.
 - I may not kill in self-defense.
 - ii. Yes.
 - Proceed to Question 2d.
 - d. Need I use lethal force to resolve this conflict?
 - i. No.
 - I may not kill in self-defense.
 - ii. Yes.
 - Proceed to Question 3.
3. What motivates my action?
- a. My actions are motivated by my desire to survive.
 - I should not kill in self-defense.
 - b. My actions are motivated by my desire for vengeance.
 - I may not kill in self-defense.
 - c. My actions are motivated by a love for others.
 - i. I am motivated by my love of those who rely upon me.
 - I may kill in self-defense.
 - ii. I am motivated by love for my attacker.
 - I should not resist my attacker.
 - iii. I am motivated by love for those closest to my attacker.
 - I should not resist my attacker.

According to this ethic, a private individual should kill in self-defense only when 1) he has been attacked or threatened, 2) the use of lethal force is necessary to protect his life, and 3) his action is motivated by his love of those who rely upon him.

One might see this list of questions and resign himself to acting instinctively when attacked. This, however, is the worst decision he could make. Considering how one should act in hypothetical circumstances does, at times, seem to be more trouble than it is worth and certainly requires a great deal

of mental energy. Nevertheless, it would be foolish for one to resign himself to acting instinctively in times of danger, for reason, which allows individuals to consider the morality of killing in self-defense, is not only useful but also a gift, the employment of which makes one human. Furthermore, because reason is that which differentiates men from plants and animals, men are held accountable to it.

Ultimately, at the heart of the debate over the morality of killing in self-defense is a debate over the morality of self-love, the desire for self-preservation that typically motivates such action. According to Augustine, an individual should not cling so desperately to his temporal life that he is willing to take that of another in order to preserve his own. The act of killing in self-defense, therefore, is an outward sign that one loves his temporal life inordinately. According to Aquinas, however, it is perfectly permissible for one to kill in self-defense because the desire to preserve one's own life is a precept of the natural law. That being said, Aquinas also prohibits the most righteous individuals, clerics, from killing in self-defense and in so doing, suggests that self-sacrifice is more morally upright than self-defense.

Whereas the Old Testament provides one with an understanding of justice, Jesus, in the New Testament, calls men to "live for righteousness."⁷⁸ By commanding that individuals not resist evildoers, Jesus encourages men to act sacrificially, putting the lives of others before their own. Those who attempt to kill their attackers have placed the value of their own lives above those of their attackers and in so doing violate Jesus' command. Therefore, unless one feels that failure to kill his attacker will result in irreparable harm to the well-being of those who rely upon him, he should not

⁷⁸ See *NRSV*, pg. 2282. 1 Peter 2:24

kill in self-defense but instead imitate Jesus by submitting himself to the will of his attacker.

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