

Talking to Children About War

*I'm concerned about a better world.
I'm concerned about justice; I'm concerned about brotherhood; I'm concerned about truth.
And when one is concerned about that, he can never advocate violence...
Darkness cannot put out darkness. Only light can do that.
- Martin Luther King, Jr.*

1. The Question

Snuggled up with my 4-year old on a recent evening, having just finished up our nighttime routine, we were ready to read a bedtime story. He picked out a book we'd just gotten from the library about medieval castles. We read about castle design, knights and jousting tournaments, and life in a castle. But about halfway through, there is trouble. The castle lord is away, and a hostile army is approaching. It's war. I treaded my way carefully through the narrative, trying to avoid words like 'enemies' or 'war.' But children are very perceptive, especially when they suspect something is being hidden from them. Pointing at the invading army, he asked, "Who are those people?" Then, examining the archers loosing their arrows from the battlements, "What are they doing?"

As a philosopher, I could've gone on and on about just war theory (the collection of arguments that justifies war, especially defensive war) and pacifism (the position that war cannot be justified). But as a parent to a preschooler, I was at a loss. I just couldn't think of the right thing to say. And so what followed were just more euphemisms and obfuscations.

As a society, we think a lot about when and how we should talk to our children about sex. Perhaps that's because we believe sex is a really important part of life, and we want our children to have the time and space to figure it out well. Or perhaps it's because if we don't, they'll learn about it from (our sexist) society and from watching

pornography. Whatever the reason, it seems we generally agree that parents and caregivers should start the conversation early.

Could it be that similar reasoning should apply when it comes to talking to our children about war? After all, violence is also a significant part of life, and children are learning about it all the time from their peers and from society. And so it seems to me that we should be intervening to shape their understanding of war, and thereby shape their understanding of how they ought to relate to others. This then raises for us a hard question: When and how should we teach children about war?

2. Violence as Virtue

One of the guiding principles at my child's preschool is that children learn through play. And so teachers pay attention to what scenarios the children are imagining, how are they resolving conflict, and what tools or toys are they using, for example. One toy beloved by children is LEGO. Jockeying with Mattel, which owns Barbie, LEGO is one of the world's largest toy manufacturers. Researchers have noticed a significant shift in the products offered by LEGO – more and more, LEGO has been selling characters that are heavily armed – and almost half of their advertisements now feature battle scenes.¹ One theory to explain this shift is that LEGO had to reinvent itself in order to keep up with television and video games, which were depicting more and more violence in order to catch the attention of consumers.

¹ C. Bartneck, Q. M. Ser, E. Moltchanova, J. Smithies, & E. Harrington, "Have Legos Become More Violent?" PLoS ONE, 11(5), e0155401 (2016).
<http://www.bartneck.de/publications/2016/legoViolence/index.html>

I don't mean to take sides on the debate over whether violent toys and video games make children more violent or otherwise affect them negatively. From a brief skim of the literature, it looks like it's very much a live question. Instead, what I'm trying to highlight is a rather pedestrian point – that children's toys seem to be getting more and more violent.

Even museums aimed at children promote themselves through the promise of violent conflict and gore. In Los Angeles, for example, in front of the Natural History Museum, is a statue of two dinosaurs locked in mortal combat – a T. Rex coming in for the kill, against a triceratops brandishing its horns. Or consider the (temporary) dinosaur statue in front of the Natural History Museum in Philadelphia – it's the same scene. Why is it never a statue of, say, some Maiasaura raising their young in communal breeding grounds?

I'm not opposed to struggle and conflict, and recognize that they can often engender resilience and heroism. Or grit. But I worry about the particular manifestations of struggle and conflict that we surround our children with. And I can't help but wonder if we are teaching our children to be thrilled at the sight of certain kinds of violence.

Even if this last point is true, some might object, it doesn't tell us very much about whether it's bad to surround our children with such imagery. After all, the objection goes on, people like seeing things they don't actually want to see happen. People who enjoy watching horror movies don't want to see people getting tortured and dismembered in real life. Same thing for alien invasions. I'm sure there's something to this. But I don't think this can be the whole story. Consider, for example, that while our mainstream television, movie, and video game entertainments are filled with scenarios of killing,

there is *relatively* little sexual violence, and even rarer, child abuse. It is a particular type of violence that we want to see portrayed. One conjecture to explain this distinction, between violence that entertains us and violence that repels us, is that we align certain kinds of violence with virtue. If this conjecture is correct, then what we are doing when we surround our children with scenarios of violence is teaching them to enjoy the “good” kind of violence and to abhor the “bad” kind.

Let me give three examples of stories that teach us that violence is virtuous. I recently saw the movie *Die Hard* (yes, the one with Bruce Willis released in 1988). In it, our protagonist, Detective John McClane, strikes up a friendship with Sergeant Al Powell. Powell admits to McClane that, although he carries around a gun, he hasn't been able to use it since accidentally shooting and killing a child several years ago. Now we'll fast forward to the end of the movie – an unarmed McClane is suddenly confronted by a bad guy with a gun, and it looks like our hero is done for. But then Powell pulls out his gun and shoots the bad guy. Powell and McClane exchange a meaningful look, and we get the feeling that they will become life-long friends. The movie is ridiculous, but the lesson is, I think, dead serious. Powell was, before killing the bad guy, a diminished person because he was emotionally unable to use his gun to fulfill his role as protector. But now, having killed the bad guy, having overcome the emotional block, he becomes once more a complete human being. We cheer. We welcome him back into the moral fold.

Or here's a more highbrow example, the Mesopotamian epic of *Gilgamesh*. Gilgamesh, the great king, takes offense at Enkidu, the upstart. Enraged, they have an epic fight, laying ruin to huge parts of the city. But Gilgamesh, on the edge of victory,

decides not to kill Enkidu, and allows him to get back on his feet. Why? Impressed by Enkidu's skills as a fighter, Gilgamesh comes to respect him as an equal. Although they began as adversaries, they become best friends (or, depending on your interpretation, lovers).

And here's a final example, this time a children's movie, *Land Before Time* (released in 1988, and yes, another movie I only just watched recently). The story revolves around our dinosaur hero, Littlefoot, and his ragtag group of dinosaur friends. Littlefoot has been recently orphaned, because a T. Rex killed his mother. And now the T. Rex is out to kill our hero and his friends. The T. Rex is evil and unknowable – he has no history, no language, no sense of morality. Since the T. Rex cannot be reasoned with, the only hope for our little friends is for them to kill him. They make a plan. The plan involves a lot of teamwork, and some risk of death. But they succeed. And then they rejoice, dancing around and laughing.

What does it mean for us to understand violence as a part of virtue? It means that learning to be violent (in the right circumstances) completes us as moral agents. Powell, upon killing the aggressor, once again becomes an instrument of justice. Gilgamesh, upon delivering Enkidu the beating of his life, finds a beloved companion. And Littlefoot, upon killing the T. Rex, cements his friendship with his little crew.

As a philosopher, I hesitate to rely on empirical data, but the Violence as Virtue conjecture does seem to be supported by data. In a blog post on Aeon, the researcher Tage Rai writes about his investigation, with UCLA anthropologist Alan Fiske, into why

people commit violence.² Rai argues that only 10% of violent crimes are committed by people we would recognize as psychopaths. This means that contrary to what we might believe, most violence is not perpetrated by “monsters.” Analyzing records of violence, including war, honour killing, homicide, rape, and police brutality, from a variety of sources, including first-person accounts, ethnographic observations, and demographic data, the investigators conclude that most people who commit violence are motivated by justice. That is, most people who commit violence believe that morality demands it.

But of course, people make moral mistakes all the time. The mere fact that people who commit unjust violence believe themselves to be committing just violence doesn't mean that violence is always bad, or that violence isn't sometimes just. And in fact, most of us, including philosophers, believe that violence in self-defense or violence in prosecuting a defensive war *is* justified (if not morally required). This intuition is widely shared, and runs deep. And so I'll accept for the sake of the argument the claim that violence might sometimes be just. The problem is, if we start with the belief that violence can be justified, it makes it harder for us to evaluate whether in fact our violence is justified. Let me show why in the next section.

4. Theoretical Mistakes

When we think about justified violence, the central case is one where an aggressor attacks a victim. Or where an aggressing state attacks a victim state. The question, then, is are we allowed to kill them? The general assumption is that in the face of aggression,

² Taze Rai, “How Could They?” *Aeon*, 18 June 2015. <https://aeon.co/essays/people-resort-to-violence-because-their-moral-codes-demand-it>

violence is a necessary response. That is, violence is warranted either as a way to lodge moral protest (“You can’t treat me this way!”) or to effectively defend one’s rights against aggression. But this assumption, that violence is either morally or pragmatically necessary in the face of aggression, produces a methodology – a way of thinking about our problems and conflicts – that propels us, in our thoughts in in our deeds, towards violence and war. Let me point out three theoretical problems encoded in the central case of self-defense (or defensive war), and show what real-life consequences they produce.

The first problem is that when we run through the self-defense case, we are looking out at the world comfortably occupying the moral high ground. *We* are the just and innocent party. *They* are the unjust and guilty party. And so we regard them with fear, suspicion, or distrust. Such a stark and bipolar outlook makes it hard for us to see ourselves as having played any role in bringing the conflict to its current state. If things are black and white/right and wrong, and they are wrong, we have no reason to examine whether we, too, might be wrong.

This stark outlook is especially dangerous for us as Americans, the largest military power the world has ever known. (In 2017, the U.S. spent \$590 billion, or almost 15% of the federal budget, on the military.³ Our military budget is greater than the next 7 countries combined.) The consequence is that we find ourselves entrenching in a position where we fear the world (and the world fears us), and so in a position where we cannot accurately measure the risks we face.

³ Leigh Angres and Jorge Salazar, “The Federal Budget in 2017,” *Congressional Budget Office*, March 2018. <https://www.cbo.gov/system/files?file=115th-congress-2017-2018/graphic/53624-fy17federalbudget.pdf>

The second problem is that when we run through the self-defense case, we are also looking out at the world wielding the belief that might makes right. Not, perhaps, in the sense that Thrasymachus advances in Plato's *Republic*, where whoever is stronger gets to determine what justice is. But in the sense that whatever we (Americans) do, as the stronger party, *is* justice because we are virtuous. *Our* might makes right.

For the real-life consequence, we can look to George W. Bush's proclamation after 9/11, that "whether we bring our enemies to justice, or bring justice to our enemies, justice will be done."⁴ What was he proclaiming? Since our violence is virtuous, it doesn't matter whether we use legal or extralegal means. It's all justice.

The third and final problem I'd like to point out is the assumption that it's possible for a democratic society to survive a war. Can a democratic society thrive when it's embedded in a system of martial virtue? The lesson learned from victory is that he who is mightiest at wielding the sword wins, and it is hard to see how this could be compatible with the virtues of democratic citizenship.

Of the many real-life problems that are produced when a democratic society adopts a system of martial virtue, one in particular caught the eye of Jane Addams, a social worker, peace activist, and public philosopher, and the first American woman to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. As Addams noticed,

"From the time a soldier is born to the moment he marches in his uniform to be wantonly destroyed, it is largely the women of his household who have cared for him. War overthrows not only the work of the mother, the nurse, and the teacher, but at the same time ruthlessly destroys the very conception of the careful nurture of life."⁵

⁴ <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>

⁵ "What War is Destroying," in *Jane Addams on Peace, War, and International Understanding 1899-1932*, ed. Allen F. Davis (Garland Publishing, Inc. 1976).

It is difficult for us to reconcile martial virtue with gender equality, when martial virtue discounts the ethics of care and erases the work that women traditionally do. On the whole, women don't get statues erected of them in public squares, don't get roads named after them, don't get to go to the front of the line at the airport, don't get cheered by crowds during the 7th inning stretch. As a society organized around martial virtue, we keep women invisible.

And so even if we start with what looks like a reasonable position – that killing in self-defense is permissible because violence is necessary – we are propelled towards taking an ever more violent and unjust outlook on the world. This is part of the *price* of endorsing a system of a martial virtue that we rarely acknowledge, but was clear enough to Eisenhower (who no one will mistake for a dove) when he warned the nation in 1953:

“Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies in the final sense a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and not clothed. This is a world in arms. This world in arms is not spending money alone; it is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children. . . . This is not a way of life at all in any true sense. Under the clouds of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron.”⁶

4. Resistance

If these theoretical problems and their real-life consequences give us reason to reject the case of self-defense as the one that should absorb all our attention when we consider the question of the legitimacy of violence, what should we replace it with? We might find some help from Bertrand Russell, the British philosopher and pacifist, who

⁶ https://www.eisenhower.archives.gov/all_about_ike/speeches/chance_for_peace.pdf

argued, “We must learn to think rather less of the dangers to be avoided than of the good that will lie within our grasp if we can believe in it and let it dominate our thoughts.”⁷

In that spirit, I suggest the following thought experiment: What would happen if we (Americans) unilaterally disarmed? What if we took the \$590 billion a year we currently spend on the military, and spent it on helping ourselves and others in non-militaristic ways – in the form of food, shelter, medicine, and education? Many of us might not make it very far in this thought experiment before hitting on the conclusion that what will happen is that we will be destroyed by our enemies.

But can we try a little harder? Can we be a little more adventurous? If we are the ones that everyone fears, and so if we are the ostensible reason for everyone else to be armed, what might happen once that ostensible reason is gone? Again, we might get stuck and conclude that things will go on much the same as they always have – in a world split into conquerors and the conquered, we will become the conquered.

Let me try one more nudge. If Addams’ simple observation, that “[e]very child on the face of the face of the earth represents someone’s care and thought,” is true enough, is it possible that once the ostensible reason for everyone’s being armed is gone, that people the world over will take up Addams’ question: Why should we send our children forth to be wantonly destroyed? If it’s possible that this question will resonate, then our thought experiment ends with worldwide disarmament. And if we can imagine such a conclusion, I think this is the beginning of radical resistance.

⁷ “Science and Human Life,” in *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell, Vol. 29: Détente or Destruction, 1955-57*, ed. Andrew Bone (London, New York: Routledge, 2012).

The most common objection I've heard to this line of thinking is that it's just wishful thinking – we can think of a lot of nice things, like elephants made out of cotton candy or chocolate chips raining from the sky, but that won't have any effect on reality. I think this is too dismissive. Thinking about a peaceful future is the first step in constructing a peaceful reality. The more we think about what a peaceful future might look like, and the more we engage in this thinking with others, the more we develop our understanding of what kind of people we want to be, and of what kind of people we need to be.

5. The Answer

I began this essay with a hard question: When and how should we teach children about war? If what I've argued for in this essay is true, then at least one concrete lesson emerges for us as parents and caregivers – instead of allowing children to be indoctrinated into a system of martial virtue, we should be teaching them to contribute to the possibility of peace through nonviolence.

When the time comes, I will tell my son that war is not inevitable. That war is the result of countless choices, and that we can learn to choose differently. And that we must learn to choose differently because war is a catastrophe.

Most intimately, war is a catastrophe because it destroys our hope in each other, and so our hope for the future. I'd like to end with one final observation from Addams:

“Every woman who cares for a little child fondly throws her imagination forward to the time when he shall have become a great and heroic man. Every baby is thus made human, and is developed by the hope and expectation which surrounds him.”⁸

⁸ “What War is Destroying,” *supra* note 5.

If we raise children in the expectation of war, and shape their moral development to accommodate this perceived reality by teaching them that violence and killing is sometimes necessary and good, we mold their moral personalities and constrain their imagination in ways that make it difficult for them to seek genuine peace.

It might be true that disarmament and developing an ethic of nonviolence will leave us vulnerable in ways we wouldn't otherwise have been. But this is a choice we must make because it provides the only realistic prospect for us to live in peace and justice. And so what we must do as parents and caregivers is to help children develop a new kind of bravery. The bravery to believe that peace is possible.