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GUNS, GOVERNMENT, AND THE AMERICAN WAY: BALANCING LIBERTY RIGHTS IN A LIBERAL STATE

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A liberal government is charged with the protection of its citizens and their individual rights. In order to satisfy this role, the state must determine when it must intervene on the self-governance of its people, and when it must leave them alone. The controversy over gun control in the United States is illustrative of the characteristic tension between these foundational duties of the state. Philosophical discussion of this tension is generally limited to concerns about autonomy and security. This thesis expands the scope of inquiry to include the liberal rights to equality and culture. Cultural norms and the stereotypical “American” identity emphasize gun ownership as a symbol and tool of self-reliance, stoicism, and independence. Wholly disallowing ownership would belie the American emphasis on liberty and would suppress those national cultures in which guns are used as an expression of it. All else being equal, I argue that such measures would be morally wrong, as the absolute denial of legal gun ownership would violate the fundamental right of cultural identity, thus inhibiting the autonomy rights of American individuals to an impermissible degree. However, equality is an issue as well. Notably absent from the philosophical debates about gun ownership is the vastly disproportionate impact of gun violence on African Americans. This paper argues that the principle of equality and concern for public safety morally mandate that certain restrictions be placed on the availability of firearms and ownership—even when considering valid cultural claims to gun rights and the practical security issues that arise in non-ideal theory. Gun control and autonomy rights are not mutually exclusive. They exist in tandem, as all rights must. The question that must be asked, then, is which right outweighs another under what circumstances—a problem with necessitates a series of calculations, scaling, and social inquiry to reach an accurate conclusion.