Case #10: Philosophizing with Guns

Almost 50 years ago, the first mass shooting at a college happened at the University of Texas (UT), resulting in the deaths of 14 people.¹ Now, the frequency and severity of such incidents are increasing. In response, college campuses across Texas are becoming “concealed carry zones.”² At UT Austin, students may carry concealed weapons in the classroom but not in dormitories. In the classroom, students must keep weapons holstered and may not keep a bullet in the chamber of a semi-automatic weapon.³

Supporters of the law assert the need for greater safety on college campuses given the proliferation of mass shootings across the country.⁴ Since concealed carry bans have been ineffective, they argue permitting weapons will increase campus security. In the words of one supporter, Virginia Tech’s concealed weapons ban left people “defenseless as a cold-blooded gunman methodically killed 32 of them over the course of two and a half hours.”⁵ By allowing everyone to have a gun, so the argument goes, potential victims will have the ability to defend themselves.

Opponents point out that there are, in fact, very few instances of gun violence on college campuses. The LA Times reports that, “[o]f the 18,536 homicides in Texas between 2001 and 2013, only five—that's right, just five—occurred on or near college campuses.” At present, suicide is the second leading cause of death among college students (behind only vehicle-related deaths) and the proliferation of weapons on campus may increase the risk of successful suicide attempts.⁶ Further, some worry that allowing concealed carry will increase the likelihood that a professor will be shot by a disgruntled student.

In a recent editorial for The New York Times, philosopher Simone Gubler criticizes the Texas law for being anathema to the values of higher education (i.e., academic freedom, intellectual debate, etc.).⁷ Moreover, she worries that the presence of guns might transform the nature of personal interactions through the introduction of an object that alters power and authority structures: “When I strap on my gun and head into a public space, I alter the quality of that space. I introduce an object that conveys an attitude in which people figure as things—as obstacles to be overcome, as items to be manipulated, as potential corpses.” This debate raises important questions both about public safety and the nature of academic spaces.

suicide


Case from the 2016 Regional Ethics Bowls

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