

## Your View: The Second Amendment — How relevant are 20 dead children?

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Every once in a while, an event takes place across the globe or in our backyard that changes the trajectory of American politics — 9/11 is the most pristine example, but that day does not stand alone. One would think that the massacre of 20 of our children, and the deaths of eight more adults in Newtown, Conn., in December of 2012 would have had some impact, but, 18 months later, it all seems like so many news cycles ago. One would think that the slaughter of 27 people and the suicide of a mentally imbalanced young man with a legally purchased semiautomatic assault rifle would have cut deeper into our national conscience. It didn't.

One reason, I believe, is that we lack a certain kind of context within which to discuss these types of issues. The context I'm referring to is unlike the context that journalists wrangle with, or, "factual context." After Newtown, this country engaged in a very serious conversation about what the loss of those lives meant to us. The problem is that our policies didn't change as a result of that conversation, which suggests that what we learned simply didn't sufficiently move us. This is what I will not accept. Every American felt the loss of those innocents that day, yet half of us resolved to change our firearm laws to reflect a, "Post-Newtown World," and the other half reached for their ammunition. Let me offer you one reason why.

There are two different perspectives that Americans tend to embrace: the religious and the natural, and both of these viewpoints have healthy support in our current social institutions. Yet, at the same time, they are both deeply rooted in our philosophical history. In 1641, Rene Descartes, the great rationalist, published his "Meditations on First Philosophy," (it was subtitled, "In which the existence of God and the immortality of the soul is demonstrated.") and introduced the western world to Cartesian Dualism. The idea is that the world (reality) comprises two different kinds of stuff: the physical and the immaterial. The world you see around you, the physical world, is subject to the laws of physics, and unfolds by virtue of unbroken natural law, but our mind (or soul, if you prefer) is a different matter (pardon the pun).

For Descartes, the physical domain is simply deterministic. This is a hard conclusion to avoid. If you spend the next 20 years of your life setting up the most complicated string of dominos humanity has ever known, when you flip the first one, the outcome is completely dependent upon the laws of physics. No amount of wishful thinking, either by you or the domino, is going to change that outcome, save some future intervention. That being the case, what about we humans? Well, moral responsibility requires a choice, and if you can't make that choice, then you are nothing more than one of those countless dominos awaiting your fate. Why don't the laws of physics act upon the neurons in our brain the same way they act upon the dominos?

Our mind, according to Descartes, plays by different rules. It exists, but it is neither physical nor extended. It's immaterial; it's made out of the same kind of stuff our ideas or dreams are made of, and it gives rise to our personality, wants, desires and talents. And, our freewill, but, since it's not a part of the physical world, it allows us to freely negotiate our way though the, "clockwork universe." This is

big freewill: Independent freedom to choose our path in an otherwise deterministic universe.

A hundred years later, the renowned empiricist David Hume would set us on a different course. Hume was a materialist. He believed that the only stuff in this world is the material, physical matter we see around us, and the only way we have access to it is through our five senses. Hume believed in freewill, but his materialism brought him closer to the physical world, and the consequences of our interaction with it. David Hume set the stage for the Age of Science.

When a Second Amendment advocate says, "Guns don't kill people, people kill people," she's expressing a very Cartesian sentiment. She's saying, "No matter what you say, when I pick up that gun, I have control. I can freely choose what happens next, and, whatever the outcome, I am responsible." When someone with a naturalistic, scientific worldview is confronted with the same scenario, they think, "Hey, we're nothing more than smart animals, and we're subject to the laws of statistics like anything else. And, when you take 300 million people, and toss a bunch of weapons into the mix, you get (tragically) predictable results." And, this is why this debate will never be settled.