Holding Americans Accountable and Centering Students: An Ecumenical and Capability Approach to Preventing School Shootings

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In the United States, mass school shootings and in-school gun violence have dramatically increased since the Columbine shooting in 1999.[1] In fact, we have had so many school shootings that now there is even a predictable cycle for how America will react. First, there is rampant fear, especially near the school site, then an outpouring of concern. Teddy bears, cards, and other mementos are left at the school building. Vigils are held; communities grieve. For a brief moment, the nation unites to mourn, with politicians across the aisle condemning the fact that yet another school shooting has occurred. This unity is soon shattered as the debate about guns consumes the narrative, with pundits on both sides advancing their particular pro- or anti-firearm agenda. Each side accuses the other of politicizing the tragedy. Eventually, the national public tires of what seems like an unbridgeable difference regarding guns, and the media stops covering the story. The majority of Americans simply move on from the tragedy, leaving the community to pick up the pieces.

This cycle is predictable, and it is my belief that this cycle represents a failure of collective imagination, and that this failure is not a symptom of the tragedy, but a part of its causation. We know school shootings are not an inevitable phenomenon—they have been curtailed in many parts of the world and were not a prominent feature of school life in the United States until the late 20th century.[2] The fact that they persist here is remarkable, and surely something about the way American adults handle these tragedies perpetuates them, rather than curbs them.

In this paper, I set out to (i) identify American adults' relationship with school shootings and (ii) argue that the brief moment of common ground, when our nation unites to mourn, can and must be translated into a robust social imagination for what students should experience in schools.

This will not be a paper about gun control. Other authors have thoroughly addressed the pros and cons of regulating guns, or have compared "private gun possession" to a "nuclear arms race."[3] However, when considering student safety, I would argue that oftentimes student experiences have been on the *periphery* of these discussions. Instead of privileging the lived experiences of students, American adults have spent much of their time talking and writing about private and public gun possession. By focusing on these inhuman elements, we have ignored what we really mean by *student safety* itself—that is, students' actual capability to be safe. If we recenter students and their actual experiences of school safety, perhaps American adults can create new social conditions that do not contribute to the prevalence of school shootings. What would such a recentering look like? To answer this question, I will later turn to Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum's *capability approach* to justice.

WHY AN ECUMENICAL APPROACH?

How can American adults understand their relationship to the school shootings that our students increasingly experience? By viewing this problem through a prism of another dynamic—that of wealthy and less wealthy countries as outlined in Thomas Pogge's *Real World* Justice—we can better understand the culpability of American adults. In *Real World Justice,* Pogge critiques the global elite, particularly members of affluent nations who rely upon economic analyses to justify their luxurious lifestyle while members of developing nations suffer.[4] To rescale Pogge's international argument to the United States, I will critique the American adults who have had greater opportunity to influence national culture

(in terms of years) than students and are able to more fully participate in democratic discourse. Just as members of affluent nations rely upon economic analyses to justify their lifestyle, so American adults rely upon their ideological scruples to justify their inaction in comprehensively addressing school shootings. Therefore, in this paper, I will argue that *by shaping and enforcing the social conditions that foreseeably, repeatedly, and avoidably cause school firearm violence, American adults are harming American students*.[5]

The power of Pogge's writing is that he does not limit himself to one philosophical tradition, and instead makes his argument by illustrating through what he calls an "ecumenical" approach.[6] As I understand Pogge, an "ecumenical approach" is one which finds common ground across differing notions of justice, appealing to each conception of "the right" on its own terms, and demonstrating that the status quo violates the demands of justice no matter which conception a person may hold. Adapting Pogge, I will show how each aspect of his "ecumenical approach" can be understood in terms of U.S. adults' failure to address school shootings.[7]

Within American democracy, the advantage of ecumenical discussions of harm is that they are both *reflexive* and *constructive*. The American political landscape is characterized by a plurality of conceptions of justice. Because the ecumenical approach reflects the pluralistic nature of American society and has the ability to respond to distinct conceptions of justice, it is reflexive. Even if the ecumenical approach does not address each conception of justice held by each citizen, meaningfully acknowledging the plurality inherent in American society allows the ecumenical approach to mirror our multiple viewpoints more fully than a single hegemonic theory. Moreover, illustrating harm across this plurality enables the ecumenical approach to influence *and be influenced by* multiple conceptions of justice prevalent in our society. I argue that this

reflexive element makes the ecumenical approach more effective in dealing with problems in the United States because its plurality is authentic to our diverse social and political climate.

Ecumenical discussions of harm within the United States are also *constructive,* in that their appeal to a plurality of conceptions of just action promotes democratic agreement. If the ecumenical argument presented does indeed resonate across multiple constituencies, these constituencies now have a common ground for democratic action. Thus, the ecumenical approach is not only a theoretical connection between pluralistic conceptions of justice, but it can also be foundational for political movements across disparate groups. Understood this way, the constructive element of ecumenical arguments has the ability to create "overlapping consensus" in the Rawlsian sense.[8] When "reasonable though opposing religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines" find reasons to support a common political claim, that political claim is a point of overlapping consensus.[9] If ecumenical arguments, such as Pogge's, successfully address "reasonable though opposing" conceptions of justice, then their conclusion also represents a point of overlapping consensus.[10] This overlapping consensus represents a *constructive* foundation for understanding, if not solving, societal problems.

HOW AMERICAN ADULTS CREATE AND BENEFIT FROM SOCIAL CONDITIONS

Because I claim that American adults create the social conditions that cause the pattern of firearm violence in schools, and that this is a form of injustice, there are a few clarifications that must be made before I proceed. Which social conditions am I referring to, and how do American adults create and enforce them? For the purposes of this paper, *social conditions* can be understood as the ecological factors that promote violent ideation, encourage toxic masculinity, fail to recognize

severe mental health issues, enable violent people to access firearms, and position schools as targets to be "hardened."[11] Thus, *social conditions* include a wide range of conversations and institutions *created* and *maintained* by American adults. Verlinden, Hersen, and Thomas link factors such as media glorification of violent acts, poor opportunities for community involvement, and firearm availability—all of which are driven by adult decisions—to school violence.[12]

In a moment, I will illustrate how these social conditions *cause* the pattern of firearm violence in schools, but before doing so, I recognize that a fundamental challenge that Pogge addresses should also be considered in my work. Namely, readers may "suggest that I [Pogge] am making *conceptual* mistakes by relabeling as harm what are really failures to aid and protect."[13] This distinction is important because "negative… moral duties are more stringent than positive ones."[14] For example, "the duty not to assault people is more stringent than the duty to prevent such assaults by others."[15] Pogge responds to this challenge by arguing that because affluent nations have created and still sustain the social institutions that harm the world's poor, and because they benefit from these institutions, they have a duty to dismantle these institutions and cease harming the most vulnerable in society.[16]

Similarly, as citizens of a democratic republic, we are implicated in political debate through our voices and our votes, and as consumers of commodities and of media, our demands influence the culture that surrounds us. To the extent that this culture is composed of ecological factors that enable school shootings, American adults are responsible. Do American adults also benefit from this influence? I would argue *yes*, insofar as our political and consumer preferences are reflected in the political rhetoric, media, and commodities available to us. Importantly, this does not mean that our individual preferences are (always) satisfied,

but rather that our society's pluralistic appetites are reflected in American culture and are shaped by our individual preferences.[17] To the extent that the latter condition is true, we benefit as a society, even if on the individual level we are dissatisfied with some or even most of the cultural habits that surround us.

AN ECUMENICAL ARGUMENT FOR HARM CAUSED BY AMERICAN ADULTS

At this point, I have attempted to delineate how adults in the United States harm American students by sustaining a culture of violence. I have also attempted to showcase the strengths of applying Pogge's ecumenical approach to the United States context. Now I will venture into the actual ecumenical arguments themselves. In *Real World Justice,* Pogge first considers historical process approaches to justice, then consequentialist arguments, and then responds to causal critiques.[18] The comparisons in this paper will follow the same arc.

Let's begin with Americans who believe that the central criteria in evaluating the relationship of American adults to American students with respect to school violence is the historical path that created the situation students face today.[19] If there are "grievous wrongs" that form this path, then the situation students face in schools is a harm perpetrated by the adult community. I argue that there were grievous wrongs on the historical path to the present issues surrounding school safety. For example, some American adults have acted in ways that enable school firearm violence, from perpetrating and consuming inappropriate media coverage of violent acts in school, to deregulating gun ownership such that those with ill-intent have easier access to firearms and ammunition, to supporting state governments that defund school counseling and other supportive programs.[20] Moreover, many American adults who have not directly participated in the preceding processes have allowed their inert political

ideology to be a stand-in for actions that would have helped prevent school firearm violence. Despite the fact that some American adults have worked extremely hard to prevent school shootings, the aforementioned injustices still indict the current situation in terms of historical process.

Some readers cast a wider historical process net—that is, they will accept global inequality if it can be shown that "it *could* have come about on a morally acceptable path."[21] Is there a morally acceptable path in which the prevalence of today's school shootings could have come about? Of course, school shootings are never morally acceptable—but is there a morally acceptable counterfactual in which American adults are not implicated in these horrendous tragedies? I will argue *no*. Imagine that American students and American adults had proportional influence on American social structures.[22] Is there a situation in which American youth would cede this influence such that it results in the stagnant deliberation regarding the prevention of school shootings we have today? I cannot imagine so, especially as many American youths are walking out of schools to protest the current dialogue surrounding school violence.[23]

Finally, let's consider readers who adhere to a consequentialist viewpoint. These readers would determine whether harm has been/is being committed by assessing the current situation against "feasible alternatives" and their outcomes.[24] In other words, a consequentialist accepts injustice if there are no other pragmatic, "feasible" alternatives that would be more just. The consequentialist perspective is fiercely pragmatic—not only does an ecumenical response to it have to demonstrate that the current situation is unjust, but that it is more unjust then the consequences of implementing and adhering to other options.

Within the consequentialist framework, Pogge sets his criterion for justice as "a minimal and widely accepted demand… on all national institutional schemes that these must be designed to avoid life-saving

poverty insofar as is reasonably possible."[25] Unfortunately for Pogge, the scale of his argument prevents him from making direct comparisons—there are no other "global orders." Fortunately for my parallel to Pogge's consequentialist argument, the rescaling of his global ecumenical framework to fit the national level allows me to make comparisons across countries. Although there are many "feasible alternatives" to American social conditions that impact student safety, for the purposes of this paper I will consider feasible alternative gun legislation. The United States possesses an extraordinarily high concentration of civilian-owned guns—in fact, with "less than five percent of the world's population, [the United States] has about forty-six percent of the world's civilian-owned guns."[26] The United States has not banned assault rifles or instituted universal background checks, and it also has "the highest homicide-by-firearm rate among the world's most developed nations."[27] However, countries such as South Africa and Austria have implemented more restrictive gun laws, such as "ban[ning] automatic rifles, institut[ing] background checks, permits and licenses."[28] In South Africa, these gun restrictions were linked to "a 13.6% decline on average per year in gun-related firearm deaths."[29]

Of course, it is impossible to perfectly compare national social conditions as "feasible alternatives" to one another. Each nation has its own constellation of values that shape its culture, and appropriating policies wholesale from one country to another is, therefore, unwise. Even so, I argue that the examples above demonstrate that there are practical alternatives to the United States' social conditions surrounding the prevention of school shootings. Recall the framework for the consequentialist lens: it only accepts injustice if there are no other pragmatic, "feasible" alternatives that would be more just. Some readers may protest that the feasible alternatives shown through the other countries' examples would always be unjust in the United States because they involve a change in gun rights, including arms reduction. Responding to this allegation requires

a careful consideration of the relative importance of rights, which is beyond the scope of this paper. However, if the maintenance of one right (in this case, firearm possession) interferes with another (life and safety in schools), then conceptual space exists for a robust discussion of how society should make sure these rights.[30] If such a discussion is possible, and if it could generate feasible alternatives that would be more just than the current situation, especially in terms of students' lived experiences, then upholding the current system without further consideration may reasonably constitute a violation of a negative duty.

My final set of ecumenical arguments considers the balance between systemic and individual factors. Does the ecumenical argument ignore the culpability of individuals? The same question can be asked of my argument thus far—does my analysis of how American adults create the social conditions that facilitate school violence ignore other critical causes, especially at the individual level? In my view, answering this question provides the most powerful connection between Pogge's discussion of global inequality and the American socio-cultural response to school violence. Like Pogge, I believe that the interaction between American adults and American mass shooters is "multiplicative"—the more violent-prone, assault-weapon saturated, and (mental) healthcare deprived our culture is, the greater the impact of a person who intends to do harm. Should we then wait until all individual-level problems have been solved before reforming our social conditions? Like Pogge, I argue no. If American adults create the social conditions that cause the pattern of firearm violence in schools, and if this is a form of injustice, then that fact alone is sufficient in itself to demonstrate violation of a negative duty. And if American adults have violated the duty not to harm, they must stop doing so by dismantling the societal factors that contribute to school firearm violence.

DIVERGING SOLUTIONS FOR HARM CAUSED

Let's say you accept my argument thus far. How should American adults go about dismantling something as diffuse as the societal factors that lead to school violence? Because Pogge is addressing economic injustice, his solution is, predictably, rooted in economic reparations.[31] However, the wildly diffuse array of social conditions that cause school violence cannot be addressed solely through the economic lens. There is no single measure that could address such diverse elements as fanatical internet chatrooms, the availability of weapons, divisive political rhetoric, and a broken mental healthcare infrastructure. Even if there were such a measure, could it be universally accepted in a fiercely pluralistic America? Given the diffuse nature of the problem and conceptions of how to solve it, how are American adults to begin addressing the harm that they have caused? While I cannot offer a way for American adults to extricate themselves immediately from participating in social conditions that perpetuate school violence, I can offer an alternative paradigm for considering student wellbeing.

THE STUDENT CAPABILITIES APPROACH

Thus far, I have argued that ending the harmful social conditions that American adults perpetuate requires lifting up student perspectives and reshaping social conditions to meet student needs. To some, this process may already seem to be in place—after all, many American adults advocate for students, and very few American adults would praise the fear and danger students perceive in schools. However, this agreement represents a shallow understanding of school safety, one best represented in the fleeting moments when we mourn together as a nation following a school shooting. How are we to extend that unity into a new status quo? I argue that it requires a complete reframing of our collective imagination, centering students and decentering our political stances. One powerful

tool for such a reframing is the *capabilities approach*.

When we think about the *capability* to attend school, it includes not merely the presence of a school building, school buses, teachers, and so on, but also what students can actually do and be in school. Naturally, this includes student safety—they should be able to actually do safe things and be safe in school. Specifically in the context of school and learning, student capabilities change how we imagine student safety. How are students doing and being in schools? Do they have the procedural ability to freely attend school as well as the outcome of actually being safe at school? As we consider what students are actually able to do in schools, we can be led to more robustly imagine what we want schools to be.

How might this discourse become even more impactful? Below, I explore how promoting child capabilities as a "side constraint" might be considered a duty of all Americans.[32] Along with Sen, Nussbaum created the capabilities approach to make comparisons of quality of life across nations, but Nussbaum also asserts that capabilities can be used within countries as a framework for determining a "minimum level" of flourishing.[33] It is in this latter sense that the capabilities framework is especially relevant for discussions of student safety in America. Sen and Nussbaum each address different aspects of the capability framework, with Sen "focus[ing] on the general defense of the capability space," while Nussbaum, on the other hand, attempts to distill a list of "central human capabilities" that can be pragmatically used in discussion and policy.[34] In the American political context, I believe that Nussbaum's approach applied specifically to students—*central student capabilities*—could mitigate harm for three reasons.

First, central student capabilities would act as a concrete counter-institution to the social conditions currently created by American adults. Second, because Nussbaum's capabilities framework is designed

to be "humble… [and] contested," creating a list of student capabilities would not constrain the renegotiation of liberties that has positively characterized the American political process.[35] Third, despite the fact that the list of student capabilities will be the subject of critique and revision, the language and the interpretation of the capabilities provides an opportunity for "'overlapping consensus' as described by Rawls."[36] It is this final element that makes a defined list of capabilities, like the ecumenical approach, both reflexive and constructive. The development of a capabilities approach attempts to represent the "human capabilities that can be convincingly argued to be of central importance in any human life, whatever else the person pursues or chooses."[37] Thus, central student capabilities would be *reflexive* because they recognize the plurality of "pursuits of happiness" enshrined in the American political project. These capabilities would also be *constructive* in that they provide a touch-point for consensus—a common framework for centering students in discussions of student safety.

If Americans do arrive at and accept a version of the central student capabilities, how would they relate to current social conditions? Should student capabilities be considered the goal of schooling, or should they act as "side-constraint" that preserves a plurality of essential elements as society pursues other ends? Nussbaum addresses a similar notion when she considers Sen's proposition that we should "think of rights [and their associated capabilities] as goals" for any given society.[38] However, she disagrees with Sen, arguing instead that "viewing capabilities rather like side-constraints… helps us to understand… why individuals… have an urgent claim to be treated better, even when governments are in other ways pursuing the good with great efficiency."[39] In her view, positioning human capabilities as side-constraints does not devalue their importance, but rather positions them as boundaries which must not be violated under any circumstances.[40] I believe that central student capabilities should be

viewed as both goals to reshape the American adults' collective imagination and as "side-constraints," acting as a "check" on the pluralistic goals of American adults. Thus, diverse conceptions of media, politics, and gun legislation could all be pursued, but only insofar as they do not violate the central student capabilities. If American adults came to a democratic, overlapping consensus regarding specific central student capabilities, and if they were willing to honor these capabilities as an equal complement to their own rights, this consensus could counteract the harmful social conditions that American adults have created.

In terms of our collective imagination, discussions about central student capabilities could yield new, deeper collective norms surrounding student safety. Pivoting towards student capabilities disrupts the current gun debate and centers children in our conversations, policies, and actions. Right now, we have widespread consensus that students should not die in school, and yet it seems that we are trapped in a perpetual cycle of repeated school violence. Disrupting this cycle may begin with the rich collective imagination that the capability approach can foster. It supplants the bare-bones minimum of "students should be safe in school" and points us in the direction we want to go (schools where students explore, learn, and grow) while moving away from what we want to prevent (lack of mental healthcare, gun violence in school). It is more demanding than the gun debate, and it requires that we lay down our partisan pride in order to advocate for everybody's children, but I suspect it would reshape the norms from which we make decisions that shape students' lives.

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5 Pogge, "Real World Justice," 29–53.

6 Pogge, "Real World Justice," 36.

7 Pogge, "Real World Justice," 36.

8 John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), 32.

9 Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*, 32.

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11 (Randy Borum, Dewey Cornell, William Modzeleski, and Shane Jimerson, "What Can Be Done About School Shootings?: A Review of the Evidence," *Educational Researcher* 39, no. 1 (2010), 28; Rachel Kalish and Michael Kimmel, "Suicide by Mass Murder: Masculinity, Aggrieved Entitlement, and Rampage School Shootings," *Health Sociology Review* 19, no. 4 (201): 451–464.

12 Stephanie Verlinden, Michel Hersen, and Jay Thomas, "Risk Factors in School Shootings," *Clinical Psychology Review* 20, no. 1 (2000): 3–56.

13 Pogge, "Real World Justice," 33.

14 Pogge, "Real World Justice," 34.

15 Pogge, "Real World Justice," 34.

16 Pogge, "Real World Justice."

17 It is beyond the scope of this paper to distill the method(s) that transform

our individual consumer preferences into product-media availability, but I will work from the premise that product-media availability shapes the social conditions that our children experience.

18 Pogge, "Real World Justice."

19 Pogge, "Real World Justice."

20 I will note that reporting violence is a complex normative issue in and of itself. However, I along with Lankford and Madfis (2018) and Meindl and Ivy (2018), argue that media coverage that glorifies school shootings can cause a "copycat" or "contagion" effect. See Adam Lankford and Eric Madfis, "Don't Name Them, Don't Show Them, But Report Everything Else: A Pragmatic Proposal for Denying Mass Killers the Attention They Seek and Deterring Future Offenders," *The American Behavioral Scientist* 62, no. 2 (2018): 260-279; James N. Meindl and Jonathan W. Ivy, "Reducing Media-Induced Mass Killings: Lessons From Suicide Prevention," *The American Behavioral Scientist* 62, no. 2 (2018): 242–259.

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31 Pogge, "Real World Justice," 50.

32 Martha Nussbaum, "Capabilities and Human Rights," *Fordham Law Review* 66, no. 2 (1997): 273–300.

33 Nussbaum, "Capabilities and Human Rights," 276, 279.

34 Nussbaum, "Capabilities and Human Rights," 285.

35 Nussbaum, "Capabilities and Human Rights," 286.

36 Nussbaum, "Capabilities and Human Rights," 286.

37 Nussbaum, "Capabilities and Human Rights," 286.

38 Nussbaum, "Capabilities and Human Rights," 278.

39 Nussbaum, "Capabilities and Human Rights," 300.

40 Nussbaum, "Capabilities and Human Rights," 300.