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Colloquium in Legal, Political, and Social Philosophy

**Conducted by
Liam Murphy and Samuel Scheffler**

**Speaker: Derrick Darby, Rutgers University
Paper: Armed Self-Defense**



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ARMED SELF-DEFENSE

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LECTURE I: RESISTING RACIST VIOLENCE

I. Introduction

The American South was spoiled by incalculable cases of racist violence before and during the civil rights era. Armed white supremacists were often the culprits. And their violence was often on full display when black citizens were engaged in nonviolent struggles for social, political, civil, and economic rights. Blacks were frequent targets of threats of bodily violence. And, sadly, these threats were routinely acted upon causing community chaos and countless casualties. An essential aspect of many of these cases is that the targets of racist violence appealed to local, state, and federal law enforcement authorities for protection but rarely received it. And when they did get help, it was typically too little, or too late, to mitigate their lamentable losses and senseless suffering. How should targets of such violence respond when government fails to protect them? They can pray and hope for the best. They can protest or riot. They can engage in civil, or even, uncivil disobedience. They can also opt for armed self-defense (ASD). I shall explore this response to racist violence in my lectures. I am specifically interested in a particular argument for ASD that is not about avenging racial wrongs or affecting revolutionary social transformation through violence. It is, more precisely, an argument that vindicates the *defensive* use of armed force within civil rights struggles.

Of course the foregoing responses to racist violence are not mutually exclusive. One can do all of these things – pray, protest, and disobey – or some combination of them and take other actions as well. Moreover, one might also believe that organizing victims of racial injustice to engage in prayer vigils, peaceful protests, and nonviolent civil disobedience has a greater chance of success when supported by those willing to take up arms, with the hope of deterring racist violence directed at persons participating in these activities. Such a view takes armed self-defense to be instrumental for resisting racist violence, which may also raise the odds for securing racial justice within an imperfect democracy.¹ And, lastly, one may endorse armed

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¹ I say “raising the odds” assuming that lowering the chances that persons engaged in forms of nonviolent protest and engagement will be violently assaulted during such activity will make it more likely that they prevail. Of course other factors may be relevant to whether they actually prevail. Moreover, as some proponents of nonviolence contended during the civil rights era, provoking racists to act violently against peaceful demonstrators, and being able to passively endure such violence, may be thought vital to gaining the sympathy and support of whites for racial justice reform. So, from this perspective, ASD may actually lower the odds. Also, let me add this: using violence to deter violent assaults is clearly different from using it to stop an actual assault. However, in the literature that I

self-defense without also affirming the value of violence for its own sake, or for retribution, and without denying the desirability of nonviolent responses to social evils.²

Thinking through the taking up of arms – specifically guns – in response to racist violence raises numerous questions. How should we understand armed self-defense and the right to it? When is it necessary to exercise this right? When is armed self-defense justified? What duties constrain the behavior of persons bearing arms for self-defense? My lectures address these important questions via a critical engagement with Robert F. Williams’s argument for armed self-defense in his 1962 book *Negroes with Guns*. My overarching objectives are to display, develop, and defend his argument. Much of this will involve sympathetic reconstruction, plugging gaps, and addressing potential objections. The principal aims of this first lecture are threefold: to preview Williams’s argument for armed self-defense (§II), to define armed self-defense in a way that coheres with this argument (§III); and to identify his response to the question of whether armed self-defense is the answer to racist violence (§IV).

As the discussion unfolds, some people may think that it is better to either eschew the language of self-defense altogether or perhaps to speak instead of self-or-other defense to avoid confusion. This suggestion stems from observing that Williams’s conception of armed self-defense extends beyond the self to include defense of family, property and other persons. While this concern is duly noted, I shall nevertheless use the language for convenience, though not only for this reason. It is, after all, the nomenclature that Williams himself employs. He uses it throughout the book including in his prologue where he writes: “I have asserted the right of Negroes to meet the violence of the Ku Klux Klan by armed self-defense—and have acted on it.”³ Others use this terminology to describe what Williams and his community were doing, at the time. And this includes both his contemporaries such as James Forman of SNCC as well as scholars writing about black armed resistance during the civil rights era.

One historian draws a useful distinction between *individual* acts of self-defense and *collective* armed self-defense. Describing the latter as “the kiss of death for African Americans in the South,” he remarks: “Unlike individualized resistance, collective and public self-defense was an assertion of group rights and equality, and,...had the potential to effectively counter police violence and white terrorism.”⁴

consider on the black arms tradition, ASD extends to both cases, particularly if we take a serious threat of violence (e.g., brandishing a shotgun) to be an instance of deterring violent assaults.

² Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams & the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press), 213.

³ Robert F. Williams, *Negroes With Guns*, ed., Marc Schleifer (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, 2013), 39.

⁴ Lance Hill, *The Deacons for Defense: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 276, note 4.

While I use the language of armed self-defense in these lectures, collective armed self-defense is, more precisely, what I have in mind. And let me make another distinction for additional clarification. White terrorism was on display when individuals were targeted outside of and within organized civil rights demonstrations such as peaceful marches and sit-ins. So there is a question of whether ASD is justified when individuals are targeted outside of such demonstrations as well as a more controversial question of whether it is justified *within* civil rights demonstrations. Williams, as I read him, answers both questions affirmatively. And as I shall discuss later, this is a significant point of disagreement between him and others including Martin Luther King, Jr.

Armed self-defense is a timely topic. The United States has the highest percentage of private gun ownership in the world and it has spiked in recent years.⁵ In the wake of the U.S. Capitol insurrection on January 6 and the COVID-19 pandemic, this rise has been attributed variously to political unrest, social disorder, fear of violent crime as well as the public's lack of faith in government and in the police to provide protection. By some estimates, the largest post-pandemic increase is in the number of black people who have legally armed themselves.⁶ The Supreme Court recently removed a legal obstacle to carrying handguns for self-defense outside of the home. It strengthened gun rights in *New York State Rifle & Pistol Ass'n v. Bruen* by invalidating a regulation requiring a show of proper cause (e.g., a demonstrated need for armed self-defense) to be granted a conceal carry license.⁷ This decision was celebrated and castigated. But what is most noteworthy, for present purposes, is its reliance on the history of anti-black racism and guns.

The Court recounts America's history of disarming black people thereby thwarting their right to bear arms. In addition to relying on historical evidence of black people being subject to violent attacks, and bearing arms in public for defense of themselves and their communities, the Court cites briefs filed in support of the petitioner including one filed by a group of New York public defenders and legal-aid attorneys who address the disparate impact of the licensing regime on their clients.⁸ Other arguments in these briefs draw on the discriminatory racial and ethnic history of the New York Law that created the licensing requirement.⁹ And still other

⁵ Gun Ownership by Country 2024. World Population Review. Retrieved October 7, 2024, from <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/gun-ownership-by-country>.

⁶ Record number of Blacks buy firearms, boost overall gun sales during COVID-19 pandemic. Retrieved October 7, 2024, from <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/jan/4/black-gun-ownership-fuels-record-number-firearms-p/>.

⁷ 142 S. Ct. 2111 (2022).

⁸ Brief of the Black Attorneys of Legal Aid, The Bronx Defenders, Brooklyn Defender Services, et al. as Amici Curiae Supporting Petitioners, *Bruen*, 142 S. Ct. 2111 (No. 20-843).

⁹ Danny Y. Li, "Antisubordinating the Second Amendment," *The Yale Law Journal* 132 (2023): 1821-1907, 1861-1863.

arguments draw on the broader U. S. history of racist gun control laws.¹⁰ Featuring black armed self-defense, as I do in these lectures, may prompt some people to worry that my work is more grist for the mill of conservative forces hellbent on elevating the Second Amendment from what they describe as “a second-class right” status.

While I cannot deny that my work could be viewed this way, even though advancing this agenda is certainly not my intent, we should welcome this attention on the history of black arms, nonetheless. Because when we consider it we see that there is much more at stake than worrying about regulations that make gun possession and public carry more difficult. If the Court is genuinely concerned with anti-black racism, and making it easier for people to carry handguns in public spaces is its way of manifesting this concern, then additional steps seem necessary to guarantee that black people can equally enjoy this right. There is no denying that black people did indeed opt to take up arms to protect themselves from racist violence when government failed to do so, both in their homes and as they peacefully organized and demonstrated for their civil and human rights. Bob Hicks, a member of the Deacons for Defense during the civil rights era, put the point this way: “...since we can’t get the local officials to protect us in our community, our neighborhood, let’s back up on the constitution of the United States, and say that we can bear arms. We have a right to defend ourselves since the legally designated authorities won’t do it. So that is all we done. That’s all.”¹¹

Attending to this history also compels us to acknowledge that the police often contributed to this predicament, sometimes by participating directly in the violence, by attempting to disarm blacks who were targeted by white supremacist violence, or simply by failing to intervene to stop the violence. *Bruen* clears the way for more people getting licensed to publicly carry handguns and, undoubtedly, an increasing number of these folks will be black people. But, as some critics of *Bruen* have pointed out, this raises the risk of such folks being arrested or even killed by the police in a world where they have broad authority to stop, question, and frisk someone and where anti-black racism still prevails.¹² Thus another thing most certainly at stake here is worrying about America’s policing practices, especially when it comes to policing black people.¹³ An earnest reckoning with the history on display in *Bruen*, and in my lectures, suggests that the Supreme Court cannot have it both ways: that is, it cannot reference this history to strengthen gun rights while

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 107.

¹² Daniel S. Harawa, “NYSRPA v. Bruen: Weaponizing Race,” *Ohio State Journal of Criminal Law* 20 (2022): 163-178.

¹³ See, generally, *Policing the Black Man: Arrest, Prosecution, and Imprisonment*, ed. Angela J. Davis (New York: Vintage Books, 2018); and Geoff Ward, “Living Histories of White Supremacist Policing: Towards Transformative Justice,” *Du Bois Review* 15:1 (2018): 167-184.

totally ignoring its lessons regarding the need to curtail police power and authority in the United States.¹⁴

There is a modest philosophical literature on gun rights and gun control that explores defenses as well as objections to persons bearing arms for self-defense. And there is an even more substantial body of legal theory and legal history scholarship. A novel aspect of my philosophical treatment of this topic is that it takes up the case for armed self-defense by attending primarily to the thought of black Americans who asserted their right to bear arms while living with the very real and omnipresent threat of racist violence.¹⁵ Throughout these lectures – with such cases steering the analysis – I will reference some of the existing philosophical and legal writings on gun rights and gun control including relevant case law to the extent that it helps expound or evaluate the ideas and arguments advanced by Williams and other black thinkers. Readers looking for a point-by-point engagement with more mainstream sources, or merely for summaries of them, must look elsewhere. These remarks also apply to the extensive philosophical and legal scholarship on self-defense.

II. Previewing Williams’s Survival Argument

This lecture begins the work of reconstructing Robert Williams’s argument for ASD in *Negroes with Guns*. Because this section is merely a preview of the argument it will raise more questions than it answers. As I readily admit, Williams says things in this text suggesting that his advocacy of armed violence may go beyond uses of defensive violence for survival when the government is unwilling or unable to offer protection. For instance, at one point, he writes: “The stranglehold of oppression cannot be loosened by a plea to the oppressor’s conscience. Social change in something as fundamental as racist oppression involves violence. You cannot have progress here without violence and upheaval, because it’s struggle for survival for one and a struggle for liberation for the other.”¹⁶ These remarks notwithstanding, as I read this book, its central argument is a case for ASD (which for Williams covers defense of self, others, and property) rooted in an interest in survival. Even if I am wrong about this, the survival argument is important, nonetheless, and is well worth developing. In an ensuing lecture, where I expound this argument in greater detail,

¹⁴ I will not pursue this matter further because my objective here is simply to underscore the topic’s timeliness.

¹⁵ Of course we need not start or end with the case of violence against black people. Some may wish to consider violence against other racial or ethnic groups, against immigrants, against religious minorities, against women or against other groups. However, I start and end with this case because I am explicitly interested in mining a work of black thought for philosophical insights, and this work features racist violence against black people who are not afforded adequate government protection against white terrorism as they struggle for their rights. It would not be a surprise if some of the insights illuminated by the case at hand are germane to other cases not considered here.

¹⁶ Williams, *Negroes With Guns*, 110.

I will elucidate the different senses of survival at issue and the circumstances that put survival at stake.

Williams was not conducting a philosophical thought experiment, and asking critics of armed self-defense to participate, when he urged them to consider “violent racism” or violent racists assaulting *their* person, *their* homes, and *their* families.¹⁷ He and many other black people in the South were experiencing this violence all too often. And Williams knew that the critics knew this. So, in stark terms, he was imploring the critics – including most notably King and the black elite civil rights leadership, who were, of course, intimately familiar with the brutality of Southern racism – to be more sincere about how *they* would respond when facing the same violence and, of equal importance, when unable to count on the protection of government or law enforcement authorities. From Williams’s point of view, the critics of armed self-defense must be disingenuous because it was self-evident that anyone in similar circumstances had a right to armed self-defense to protect themselves, their family, and property.

However, because this may not be self-evident to everyone, we must reflect upon the nature of this right to armed self-defense and its justification. And taking up “the struggle for survival,” as Williams puts it, and delineating when survival is at stake is crucial to both tasks. In its most concise formulation, on my reading, Williams’s main justification for armed self-defense, referred to henceforth as the *Survival Argument*, comes to this:

1. Armed self-defense is justified when it is necessary.
2. Armed self-defense is necessary when survival is at stake.¹⁸
3. Armed self-defense is justified when survival is at stake.

I am especially interested in unpacking and assessing his defense of the second premise. But this must await my third lecture. In the meantime, the first steps toward this goal, to be taken in the present lecture, are to consider a definition of ASD that makes its connection with violence explicit, and then to consider the precise scope of Williams’s commitment to violence when faced with nonideal circumstances. I will do the former in the next section by attending to his philosophical agreements with Malcolm X, and the latter in the section after that by attending to his

¹⁷ Ibid., 121. Williams directed this remark primarily to black civil rights leaders, the black elite, and others who denounced black people using firearms for self-defense.

¹⁸ When I do get to this, in a subsequent lecture, I will expand on this premise and ask whether it and the first premise entail the conclusion. Other questions to be considered then include whether ASD might be necessary for survival but not justified under certain conditions, and whether the premise should be modified to cover cases when our life is not literally at stake. Dealing with these matters now is beyond the scope of this lecture.

disagreements with King.¹⁹ Before getting to these tasks, let me offer brief observations to contextualize the turn to defensive violence in black political thought and action.

Black political thinkers do not see eye-to-eye on how black people should respond to violent racism. However, with the possible exceptions of unwavering pacifists, those staunchly committed to nonviolence as a matter of principle, or for weighty nonmoral reasons, many of these thinkers would probably acknowledge that, at times, self-defense, which harms or threatens to physically harm would-be attackers, is in order. Moreover, many of these thinkers (including ones in the first group) would likely affirm that armed self-defense – a type of violent resistance – is inevitable when the evil of violent racism simply becomes too much for black people to bear.

A particularly horrific spell of racial violence in United States history occurred during the “Red Summer” of 1919 in the postwar period.²⁰ Among the factors that historians have cited for the racial violence that overtook the country after World War I, especially in the South and in Northern cities, was racial economic competition fueled by mass black migration in search of better employment opportunities in industrial centers, calls for greater social equality between whites and blacks, which was perceived as a threat to America’s enduring white supremacist social order, as well as a brutal lynching and racial intimidation campaign against blacks that rarely resulted in justice and that was often facilitated by law enforcement inaction or, in some cases, conscious cooperation.²¹

For instance, in Illinois cities such as East St. Louis and Chicago, where black people reasonably loss trust in the state’s ability to provide protection, this insecurity made them more inclined to pursue armed self-defense.²² In the aftermath of the 1919 Chicago race riots, W. E. B. Du Bois poignantly captured widely shared sentiments about the necessity and inevitability of armed self-defense in a *Crisis* magazine editorial:

For three centuries we have suffered and cowered. No race ever gave Passive Resistance and Submission to Evil longer, more piteous trial. Today we raise the terrible weapon of Self-Defense. When the murderer comes, he shall not longer strike us in the back. When the armed

¹⁹ Considering King’s skepticism about ASD will also provide an opportunity to highlight the philosophical orthodoxy that necessity is a requirement of justified self-defense. Williams takes this for granted with the first premise of his argument.

²⁰ Cameron McWhirter, *Red Summer: The Summer of 1919 and the Awakening of Black America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2011).

²¹ William M. Tuttle, Jr., *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970), see especially chapters 1 and 2.

²² *Ibid.*, 232.

lynchers gather, we too must gather armed. When the mob moves, we propose to meet it with bricks and clubs and guns.²³

And years later, when blacks were on the front lines of the national struggle for freedom, jobs, and equal enjoyment and protection of civil and human rights, Malcolm X came to a similar conclusion while stressing the state's inability and unwillingness to protect them from racist violence as they peacefully pursued their rights and freedoms.²⁴ Of course, blacks also experienced racist violence before migrating North. And there is evidence that particular features of local environments in Southern states such as racial relations of economic dependency, the personalities of black political leaders, and intra-racial class politics contributed to whether ASD emerged as a significant option in response to the scourge of racist violence in different black communities.²⁵

In calling for armed self-defense, under certain circumstances, Du Bois and Malcolm X were emphasizing the need for flexibility in the freedom struggle. And Williams makes this point too. Indeed, he cites it as the essential point of disagreement between himself and King. "My only difference with Dr. King," says Williams, "is that I believe in flexibility in the freedom struggle. This means that I believe in non-violent tactics where feasible..."²⁶ The tactics that King preferred, according to Williams, were not always feasible. And when nonviolence was not feasible, Williams and Malcolm X agreed that it was imperative to "speak another language," namely, the language of armed self-defense.

Williams's use of "not feasible" is, of course, open to interpretation. Does it mean that one cannot engage in nonviolence? Does it mean that nonviolence will not deter racist violence? Or does it mean that it will be insufficient for achieving freedom? In the context that he uses these words, I think that he is focused on circumstances where a society governed by the rule of law is not operating as it should, and where this makes what would otherwise be sensible ways of acting such as non-violent resistance impractical. It is impractical both as a way of warding off racist violence and as a way of securing freedom. Of course, as King and others did, one could still insist on such resistance as a collective group strategy, a point that I will develop below. And although Williams clearly thinks that nonviolence is not enough to

²³ W. E. B. Du Bois, "Let Us Reason Together," *The Crisis* 18 (September 1919): 231.

²⁴ Malcolm X, "The Ballot or the Bullet," in *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*, ed. George Brietman (New York: Grove Press, 1965).

²⁵ Annelieke Dirks, "Between Threat and Reality: The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Emergence of Armed Self-Defense in Clarksdale and Natchez, Mississippi, 1960-1965," *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 1 (2007): 71-98.

²⁶ Williams, *Negroes with Guns*, 40.

achieve liberation from the stranglehold of oppression, as I indicated earlier, the scope of his central argument for ASD is more narrowly concerned with survival.²⁷

III. What is Armed Self-Defense?

Taking the podium after Fannie Lou Hamer (another proponent of black armed self-defense), at a 1964 Harlem rally for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party campaign, Malcolm X remarked that Hamer's white persecutors – devoid of a sense of morality and respect for law – spoke “the language of brutality,” and he argued that communication with them required using a language they understood. “If his language is with a shotgun, get a shotgun,” says Malcolm, “Yes, I said if he only understands the language of a rifle, get a rifle. If he only understands the language of a rope, get a rope. But don't waste time talking the wrong language to a man if you want to really communicate with him.”²⁸ This is a provocative way to make a point that is bound to be misunderstood.

Suppose that Hamer's white persecutors only spoke the language of using deadly force. We might ask whether “speaking the same language” means using the same force in return. If our aim is really self-defense, it may be that in some cases lesser force is necessary and sufficient to defend ourselves. In such cases Malcolm X's call to speak the same language seems inapt. He could respond, if pressed, by suggesting a weaker construal, where the call is to use whatever force is necessary and sufficient to ward off such attacks. And if one is a subjectivist about self-defense, one might insist on a formulation that appeals to whatever force a defender believes is necessary and sufficient for such purposes. But of course this would reintroduce the possibility of using deadly force against our attackers.

Two years before Malcolm X issued his provocative call, speaking after the acquittal of a white man who attempted to rape a pregnant black woman, accompanied by her six-year old son who helped her escape, Williams, expressing the collective outrage of a community denied justice, had this to say: “This

²⁷ If Williams is making an argument for ASD rooted in our interest in survival, it is of course fair to wonder how he, or a proponent of his argument, would address the pressing concerns about life-threatening as well as non-life threatening but severe harms associated with firearms. The former include death by homicide and suicide as well as death or serious injury by accidental or mass shootings. And among the latter include persons being disabled or individuals and communities being psychologically traumatized by gun-related violence. And yet another thing to address is the particular vulnerabilities of persons and communities of color (especially poor black communities) as well as women and children to such harms. Addressing these matters more fully must await another lecture. Suffice it to say for now that Williams could register this important concern while noting that it suggests, more generally, a need for regulations or policies to mitigate such injuries that would apply to everyone and not just lawfully armed blacks exercising their right to engage in defensive violence within or outside of a civil rights demonstration. Moreover, he can add that his embrace of ASD is compatible with holding that lawfully armed persons have duties pertaining to the use, possession, and storage of firearms that may contribute to mitigating the risk of certain firearms-related injuries or deaths.

²⁸ Malcolm X, “With Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer,” in *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*, 108.

demonstration today shows that the Negro in the South cannot expect justice in the courts. He must convict his attackers on the spot. He must meet violence with violence, lynching with lynching.”²⁹ But this way of putting things, namely as an imperative to speak the language of violence, is also ambiguous and subject to misunderstanding. Is it a call for defensive or offensive violence? It might easily be interpreted as a call beseeching blacks to take up weapons offensively either to retaliate for unavenged racial wrongs, to inflict violence to preempt such wrongs, or perhaps to render justice for these wrongs. At times, Williams and Malcolm X seem to invite, or at least not be especially troubled by, this interpretation. However, at other times, both appear somewhat more circumspect when calling for violence.

In the aftermath of hysteria created by the press after his remarks, Williams offered this clarification: “These court decisions open the way to violence. I do not mean that Negroes should go out and attempt to get revenge for mistreatments or injustices...” Instead “I spoke of self-defense,” said Williams, “when the courts failed to protect us.”³⁰ Malcolm X, with a bit more sarcasm, had this to say in one of his most famous speeches, after calling attention to the constitutional right of black people to own firearms: “This doesn’t mean you’re going to get a rifle and form battalions and go out looking for white folks, although you’d be within your rights — I mean, you’d be justified; but that would be illegal and we don’t do anything illegal.”³¹ These more measured remarks suggest that their provocative comments should not be taken literally. And these comments clearly support the armed self-defense narrative that I am developing.

So, to sum up, the general point being made by Williams and Malcolm X is that blacks, when faced with racist violence by armed whites, should be prepared to meet aggressive violence with protective violence and they should do so with at least equal force. To be sure, circumstances might dictate that greater or lesser force is warranted. This interpretation of “speaking the same language,” which stresses defensive violence, still raises concerns, however. Below I will attend to one raised by King about the very thin line between defensive and offensive. It targets these more measured calls for defensive violence against racist violence. It pushes back against speaking the same language as those who speak the language of brutality. But we must do some conceptual housekeeping before getting to King’s concern.

There is no definition of armed self-defense in William’s *Negroes with Guns*. So, in what remains of this section, I shall tender a tentative definition of ASD on Williams’s behalf.³² I will do so drawing in part on another definition found in the black arms tradition literature, and on actual cases of ASD presented in the text. A

²⁹ Williams, *Negroes with Guns*, 63.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 63.

³¹ Malcolm X, “The Ballot or the Bullet,” 43.

³² It must be tentative because we will not get a detailed picture of the survival argument in this lecture.

crucial bit of housekeeping that philosophers usually tend to before setting out arguments is to define key concepts. Accordingly, it would be good to have some conceptual clarification of the nature of armed self-defense, and ideally, in this case, we want a definition that coheres with Williams's survival argument.

And so I shall proceed by considering a definition of ASD proposed by a historian of the black arms tradition. I will ultimately reject it as a suitable one for Williams. But considering it is instructive, nevertheless. One place to start is by distinguishing different types of armed resistance to aggressive racist violence. Akinyele Omowale Umoja defines armed resistance as "individual and collective use of force for protection, protest, or other goals of insurgent political action and in defense of human rights."³³ And he rightly points out that guns are but one instrument of force. "Fists, feet, stones, bricks, blades, and gasoline firebombs, as Umoja notes, "may all be employed to defend, protect, or protest."³⁴ This definition is a start. But it would be more constructive to simplify things a bit. Suppose that we define *armed resistance*, more generally, as *using an instrument of force for a specific goal*. Would this work?

Here we are specifically concerned with firearms. But it is clear that Malcolm X and Williams presume that we are justified in using at least equal force when the goal is defense of self or others.³⁵ Malcolm X makes this point by stressing the importance of speaking the right language. And it seems, moreover, that they both allow for, and should allow for, a rather broad understanding of what counts as "use;" this can include simply bearing or brandishing a gun to achieve the goal in question. And in such cases there is no actual violence. So, for instance, letting a would-be racist attacker know that one is armed and prepared to shoot should count as a case of armed resistance.³⁶ When white lynch mobs took to the streets of Atlanta in 1906, W. E. B. Du Bois, rushing home to defend his family, purchased a Winchester double-barreled shotgun and buckshot ammo, and later said: "If a white mob had stepped on the campus where I lived I would without hesitation have sprayed their guts over the grass."³⁷ Had Du Bois made it known that this was his intention, say by standing guard of his home with the gun in view, this would count as armed resistance.

³³ Akinyele Omowale Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back: Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 7.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁵ Williams takes the right to self-defense to extend to defense of others and to property. I do not develop or discuss his thinking about this here. I set this matter aside for Lecture II: A Right to Resist.

³⁶ Some studies of defensive gun use incidents, measuring what the defender did with the gun, consider whether they simply showed the gun to a would be assailant. See, for example, Gary Kleck and Marc Gertz, "Armed Resistance to Crime: The Prevalence and Nature of Self-Defense with a Gun," *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 86 (1995): 150-187.

³⁷ Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 211.

However, as it stands, the foregoing definition is wanting. A knife is an instrument of force but using one to butter bread is clearly not an instance of armed resistance. Likewise, using the butt of a gun to hammer a nail does not count as armed resistance. Clearly, these are not the kind of specific goals referenced in this definition. One way to pin this down is to consider a way of distinguishing different types of armed resistance. Umoja does so, in part, by attending to how we specify the goals. He offers an illuminating taxonomy that situates armed self-defense as one of several types of resistance and included among them are retaliatory violence, spontaneous rebellion, guerilla warfare, armed vigilance/enforcement, and armed struggle.³⁸ Each type of resistance can be utilized in response to actual or prospective racist violence of which Williams gives ample instances in *Negroes with Guns*. And each type of resistance, insofar as it utilizes an instrument of force, can be viewed as an instance of violence. Broadly speaking, these types of resistance fall into three categories: *protective* (using force to protect); *retaliatory* (using force to retaliate), and *preemptive* (using force to prevent).

Umoja situates armed self-defense in the first category by defining it as “the protection of life, persons, and property from aggressive assault through the application of force necessary to thwart or neutralize attack.”³⁹ Note that this last clause raises and links the issue of proportionality. We may, of course, judge a particular use of force to protect persons from aggressive assault as morally unjustified if it is excessive or unnecessary or perhaps futile. And this judgment, about how much force is justified, pertains to the ethics of self-defense. But some philosophers might object to prejudging the question of how much force is necessary, which happens in this case by incorporating a specific stance within a conceptual definition of armed self-defense.

When we ask, “What is armed self-defense?,” we can be concerned with morally justifying the use of instruments of force to resist an aggressive assault or with conceptually elucidating what constitutes armed self-defense, among other things.⁴⁰ Of course we can also be concerned with both. Our interest in the former task leads us to ponder the conditions that must be met to morally allow what is otherwise morally unjustified conduct. And, to be sure, Williams is centrally concerned with this task. Here we find philosophers identifying and defending factors such as success, proportionality, and necessity as moral constraints on self-defense.⁴¹ Williams’s survival argument focuses on *necessity*, and on spelling out the

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁰ Samuel C. Rickless, “The Nature of Self-Defense,” *San Diego Law Review* 55 (2018): 339-356. I adapt this analysis to the case of armed self-defense.

⁴¹ Daniel Statman, “On the Success Condition for Legitimate Self-Defense,” *Ethics* 118 (2008): 659-686; Suzanne Uniacke, “Proportionality and Self-Defense,” *Law and Philosophy* 30 (2011): 253-272; and Seth Lazar, “Necessity in Self-Defense and War,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 40 (2012): 3-44.

circumstances in which it becomes necessary for black people to take up arms against racist violence. And, as for our interest in the latter (conceptual) task, here some philosophers might say that this is a prior question, concerning the nature of self-defense, which should be answered, in part, by considering fidelity to ordinary language, legal usage, and to values such as simplicity and fertility.⁴²

So, with this said, we might amend Umoja's definition as follows: *armed self-defense is the protection of life, persons, and property from aggressive assault through the application of armed force*. But to get a definition that more closely gels with Williams's survival argument we will need further modification. While we may endeavor for conceptual elucidation of the meaning of ASD that does not foreclose certain arguments that philosophers of self-defense want to have about normative matters pertaining to how much force is justified in legitimate cases of self-defense, we may not wish for a normatively neutral definition of ASD altogether. Indeed, when we consider actual cases of ASD on display in Williams's book, and his focus on ensuring black survival in the face of government's inability and unwillingness to protect, we discern a normatively laden element that must be added to a working definition of ASD.

Williams, as far as I can tell, is not interested in the conceptual task. And I have not found any evidence of him offering an explicit conceptual definition of armed self-defense. Yet he does describe numerous cases of ASD from which we can infer what he might have said about this matter if asked. Many of the cases involve actual or prospective instances of racist violence stemming from an angry white mob.

ANGRY MOB: Somebody in the crowd fired a pistol and the people again started to scream hysterically. "Kill the niggers! Kill the niggers! Pour gasoline on the niggers!" The mob started to throw stones on top of my car. So I opened the door of the car and I put one foot on the ground and stood up in the door holding an Italian carbine.⁴³

In some of these cases, the danger posed to blacks by an angry white mob is heightened by the role that the police play in efforts to disarm black people so that they are easier targets for the mob.

DISARM: [A policeman] ran straight to me and he grabbed me on the shoulder and said, "Surrender your weapon! Surrender your weapon!" I struck him in the face and knocked him back away from the car and

⁴² Uwe Steinhoff, "What is Self Defense?," *Public Affairs Quarterly* 29 (2015): 385-402.

⁴³ Williams, *Negroes with Guns*, 46.

put my carbine in his face and I told him that we didn't intend to be lynched.⁴⁴

Furthermore, in lots of cases, when black people organize amongst themselves to collectively take up arms, they are doing so to defend themselves and their community from an angry white mob.

DEFEND: Just at the beginning of darkness, white people started driving through our community, and they were shouting and screaming and some would fire out of their cars and throw objects at people on the streets. Many of the colored people started arming, exchanging guns and borrowing ammunition and forming guards for the night to defend the community from the mob massing in town.⁴⁵

And, lastly, in many of the cases described by Williams, black people who are threatened by angry white mobs, often aided by police action or inaction, are defending their persons, family, property, and community as vital interests germane to their survival.⁴⁶

SURVIVAL: When violent racism and fascism strike at their families and their homes, not in a token way but in an all-out bloody campaign, then they will be among the first to advocate self-defense. They will justify their position as a question of survival.⁴⁷

Williams's cases of racist violence provide insight that can be used to advance a tentative definition of armed self-defense on his behalf – one that gels with his survival argument. Assuming that individuals have a vital interest in survival, and that protecting self, others, and property (somewhat more controversially) advances this interest, we might provisionally define *armed self-defense*, more generally, as *using an instrument of force to defend a vital interest in survival that is threatened by another person or persons*. This relatively lean definition gels nicely with Williams's survival argument for armed self-defense. It is, however, important to stress that work will be done in a subsequent lecture to understand how Williams's understands the matter of survival. Among the questions to consider then include how exactly should this be understood and what exactly counts as a threat to survival? What if a racist aggressor attempts to merely injure but not kill? Would

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Williams, *Negroes with Guns*, 84.

⁴⁶ I shall have much more to say about this matter in Lecture III: Resistance and Survival.

⁴⁷ Williams, *Negroes with Guns*, 121.

this constitute a threat to a vital interest in survival? And regarding the last point, does Williams think that failing to call for assistance when one is witnessing an assault on someone's vital interest in survival counts as "threatening" their survival and, if so, does this justify using armed self-defense against them too – against the person that fails to render aid without undergoing any undue or unreasonable risk to themselves? Setting these pressing questions aside for now, let me note that the foregoing definition departs from Umoja's in a few notable respects.

Umoja adds a "force necessary to thwart or neutralize" an attack clause to his definition. But this prejudices a debate that some philosophers may wish to have about how much force is justified in legitimate cases of self-defense.⁴⁸ The question of how much force to use is, of course, an important yet complicated matter that speaks to the issue of proportionately. Philosophers can debate how much force is necessary for this purpose. And on this issue, as I noted earlier, Williams thinks that blacks are justified in using force at least equal to that posed by those who threaten their vital interest in survival. However, it is not inconceivable that Williams might allow for using greater force, say a 12 gauge shotgun instead of a .22 caliber pistol, or mortally wounding rather than inflicting a non-fatal injury on an attacker, particularly in cases where the interest in survival under threat is especially strong. For instance, if one thinks that the survival interest related to one's life is stronger or more stringent than the one related to one's home, and that threatening the former renders an aggressor more liable to a degree of force greater than the force they use, then this conclusion follows.⁴⁹

Alternatively, one could concede that the aggressor's particular threat to a stringent interest has made them liable to a greater measure of force while also believing that Innocent Victim, ultimately, ought to use less force than what is permissible to defend their vital interest in survival. In response to a case she calls "Locked in the House," in which she imagines an innocent person being morally justified in using more force to escape unjust confinement than might be used against them if they did not try to escape, a philosopher remarks: "Nevertheless, I think that victims ought to try to defend themselves with as little harm to those who are perpetrators as possible, as long as reducing the harm to the perpetrator is not likely to impose great costs on the victim."⁵⁰ One may draw a similar conclusion here. But

⁴⁸ Rickless raises this criticism against Steinhoff with this remark: "But Steinhoff treats the disjunctive *imminent-or-ongoing attack* requirement as part of the *conceptual content* of the term *self-defense*, and in this, to my mind, he errs." See Rickless, "The Nature of Self-Defense," 342.

⁴⁹ For a conception of proportionality in defensive force that relies upon a stringency principle, see Jonathan Quong, *The Morality of Defensive Force* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), chapter 4. Also see, Jonathan Quong, "Proportionality, Liability, and Defensive Harm," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 43 (2015): 144-173. For a critique of this account, see Uwe Steinhoff, "Quong on Proportionality in Self-defense and the 'Stringency Principle,'" unpublished mss., available at <https://philarchive.org/rec/UWEQOP>.

⁵⁰ F. M. Kamm, "Self-Defense, Resistance, and Suicide: The Taliban Women," in *How We Fight: Ethics in War*, ed. Helen Frowe and Gerald Lang (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 75-86, 78.

whatever the case may be, the foregoing definition of ASD, which I propose on Williams's behalf, neither circumvents a philosophical debate over how to resolve the proportionately question, nor does it prejudge whether equal, greater, or lesser force is compatible with this constraint. And I take these implications to be appealing features of a definition that aims to not foreclose certain philosophical debates.

In line with this point, Umoja's definition prejudges two more questions, which also render it less attractive than my proffered definition. The first one also pertains to the "force necessary to thwart or neutralize" an attack clause in his definition. Calling for ASD to do either of these things or to mitigate the harm that might come from an attack is, what some philosophers describe as, an "instrumentalist" account of armed self-defense.⁵¹ It is certainly a matter of debate as to whether ASD – a form of resistance – needs to succeed in thwarting or neutralizing an attack to count as self-defense. It might, in some cases, only be enough to make the attack more difficult, or less likely, but not to stop it or prevent the victim from suffering harm. But this need not disqualify it as an act of self-defense.

The definition of ASD that I propose does not prejudge this question of whether a particular use of force must be sufficient to neutralize an attack or mitigate harm to count as self-defense. Indeed, in many of the cases that Williams presents, black people who took up arms in self-defense still suffered harms. But part of the thinking was that Villainous Aggressors would have to think long and hard about the risk they undertook in attacking. When black people take up arms in self-defense, says Williams, "the racist must be made to realize that in attacking us he risks his own life."⁵² And this is a risk that cannot be taken lightly because, as Williams adds, "After all, his life is a white life, and he considers the white life to be superior; so why should he risk a superior life to take an inferior one?"⁵³ However, that said, Williams certainly believed that ASD, at times, could certainly thwart some attacks and thereby mitigate serious harms. Indeed, he makes this quite clear in one instance where he credits constant armed vigilance in the black community with preventing pogroms.

POGROMS: *We armed ourselves solely to defend ourselves.* And if we hadn't been armed we would have been the victims of one of the first modern pogroms against the Afro-American.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Steinhoff, "What is Self Defense?," 385. Also see, Uwe Steinhoff, *Self-Defense, Necessity, and Punishment: A Philosophical Analysis* (New York: Routledge, 2020), chapter 2.

⁵² Williams, *Negroes with Guns*, 116.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Williams, *Negroes with Guns*, 100.

So it is a further virtue of my proposed definition that it can account for the range of cases of ASD that Williams considers, cases which involve both successes and failures when it comes to averting attacks and mitigating harms with defensive force.

Taking instrumentalism about self-defense to be too demanding, some philosophers propose a less demanding definition by adding a subjective element. On one such account the use of force must be directed against an ongoing or imminent attack, and the defender must believe, correctly, that this is an effective form of resistance or that this use of force “belongs to an act type that usually functions as a means to resist an attack.”⁵⁵ Other philosophers have also appealed to subjective factors, such as belief, but have mainly taken them to be relevant in normatively evaluating defense of self and others. From this perspective, then, the distinction between objective theories and subjective ones pertains to the issue of justification. One philosopher draws the distinction as follows: “objective theories justify force based solely on the actual, external circumstances of the situation,”⁵⁶ and in contrast, “a subjective theory may or may not require that the actual, external circumstances support a justification, it will require either that the actor employing defensive force act with a certain intention, hold a particular belief, or that the threatener be at fault.”⁵⁷

My definition does not add a subjective element. And I do not view this as a defect, especially if a major reason for adding such elements is to account for the moral permissibility of defensive force. My definition allows one to insist on distinguishing between what counts as ASD from whether ASD is justified. Building in a subjective element to establish permissibility would be in tension with this accommodation.⁵⁸ Of course, one could have other reasons for opting for a subjective rather than objective view of self-defense such as that it makes better sense of certain contrived cases. Imagine, for instance, that we shoot and kill someone who is plotting to murder us by mistake, that is, we do not have the intention to thwart or mitigate their attack but that we kill them because they are hiding behind a target that we happen to be shooting at during target practice. The objectivist might say that this counts as self-defense while the subjectivist might deny this. If our intuition is more in line with the latter then we might ultimately favor subjectivism about self-defense.⁵⁹

I said the Umoja’s definition prejudged two additional questions. The second one pertains to his reference to property. His definition of ASD calls for “the protection of life, persons, and property from aggressive assault.” First, let me say that Williams

⁵⁵ Steinhoff, “What is Self Defense?,” 385.

⁵⁶ Russell Christopher, “Self-Defense and Defense of Others,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 27 (1998): 123-141, 124.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ I will revisit the role of subjective elements in Lecture III where I take up premise 2 of the survival argument.

⁵⁹ Thanks to Francis Kamm for this example and for making this point.

clearly believes that exercising the right to armed self-defense covers not just defense of self, but that it also covers defense of others and property. So this is not in dispute. This usage clearly captures Williams’s view. However, what is in dispute, is whether we must refer to property explicitly in the definition of what *counts* as armed self-defense. While I suspect that Williams may have done so himself, had he given us an explicit definition, I worry that this would perplex philosophers who find it somewhat odd to view self-defense as extending to property without further explanation.

It is a valid question to ask: Does self-defense include defense of property? And it would be preferable to have a definition that does not prejudge this and foreclose debate. Indeed, some philosophers have argued that self-defense does not include defense of property because “the *kind* of attack against which self-defensive action is taken must be restricted to threatened or actual violation of certain sort of claim, namely the kind of claim that protects interests that are tied very closely to the person—existence, integrity, and freedom.”⁶⁰ My definition does not mention property explicitly but instead refers to “a vital interest in survival.” I have yet to expand on what this means and this must await my third lecture. Suffice it to say for now that a virtue of this, more general definition, is that it leaves room for establishing with further argument that protection of property follows from this definition, along with additional assumptions about the senses of survival at issue.

Mabel Williams (Williams’s wife) recalled being schooled by her father-in-law, John Williams, about the family’s tradition of resisting white supremacy. “Daddy John always had a shotgun ready,” she recollected, “Always the shotgun was there and it was always loaded and it was always at the door. And that was the tradition.”⁶¹ And, of course, resisting white supremacy was not merely about being prepared to meet the violence of armed white supremacists with armed defensive violence. It was, more broadly, about resisting and transforming a deep rooted system of racial domination in which whites were favored over blacks in the distribution of societal benefits and burdens across all major institutions. And it was also about transforming the consciousness of the oppressed. It might be objected that defining ASD in terms of defending (or even protecting) a vital interest in survival is too limiting, and perhaps too individualistic, in that it misses the role that it can play, and has played historically, in resisting and transforming an oppressive system of racial domination and liberating black consciousness.⁶²

⁶⁰ Rickless, “The Nature of Self-Defense,” 341-342.

⁶¹ Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 57.

⁶² For a criticism of Umoja’s definition along these lines, see Chad Kautzer, “Notes for a Critical Theory of Community Self-Defense,” in *Setting Sights: Histories and Reflections on Community Armed Self-Defense*, ed. scott crow (Oakland: PM Press, 2018), 39-40.

Indeed, as I noted earlier, Williams also links the case for violence with effecting broader social change that aims to loosen the stranglehold of oppression. It may be that Williams has multiple routes to justifying ASD and that the respective arguments are supported by different definitions. But one of these routes is clearly the survival argument and, as I indicated, the definition I propose here is meant to cohere with this particular argument. One might think that my definition can be tweaked to accommodate this concern simply by modifying it to read “defend or advance a vital interest in survival,” but I worry that this shifts it from a narrow emphasis on purely defensive violence to a broader focus on offensive violence. And my project is specifically concerned with the former. Perhaps another way to address this worry, apart from the multiple routes to justification point, and consistent with keeping the focus on defensive violence, could be to expand on what counts as a vital interest in survival so that it covers defending life and property as well as dismantling a system of white supremacy.⁶³ But, as I will elaborate in a subsequent lecture, here too we must take care not to blur the distinction between defensive and offensive violence.

Perhaps the most significant points of contention in the black arms debate are over which type of violence to adopt (if one chooses to use force) and over whether to opt for nonviolence over violence as a matter of community strategy in response to the racist violence of angry mobs. Thinkers such as Malcolm X and Williams worry that nonviolence is not always feasible and argue that defensive violence is sometimes required and warranted even within civil rights demonstrations. Thinkers such as King worry, as we shall see in the next section, that violence, even if purely defensive as a matter of community strategy within a civil rights demonstration, is too costly, unnecessary, and futile, and that it is much too easy to cross the very thin line from purely protective violence to preemptive or even retaliatory violence.

IV. Is Armed Self-Defense the Answer to Racist Violence?

Martin Luther King, Jr. emphatically denied that bearing and using arms was the answer to racist violence. Yet he understood the impulse to take up arms for self-defense. Indeed – albeit unsuccessfully – he once acted upon this impulse. On the urging of a close advisor, Ralph Abernathy, who worried about looming threats of racist violence against him and his family, King once applied for and was denied a permit to carry a concealed gun in his vehicle. And we also know that King utilized armed guards in his home for “defensive precautions.”⁶⁴ So it is quite clear that he appreciated the appeal of guns for *individual* defense of self, family, and property. There was no real disagreement between him and Williams on this point.

⁶³ I pursue this point at greater length in Lecture III.

⁶⁴ Nicholas Johnson, *Negroes and the Gun: The Black Tradition of Arms* (New York: Prometheus, 2014), 262-263.

The crucial point of contention between King and Williams was on the question of whether blacks should socially organize *collective* armed self-defense to racist violence as a matter of group strategy. Williams thought that they should and actively pursued this strategy while King was a vocal critic. Recounting an early incident of black armed resistance in Monroe, North Carolina, in which blacks organized to prevent defilement of a black soldier's corpse by the Ku Klux Klan, Williams remembered this as an eye opening moment, which, as he put it, "really started us to understanding that we had to resist, and that resistance could be effective if we resisted in groups, and if we resisted with guns."⁶⁵ King did not share this sentiment. On the contrary, he argues that collective black armed resistance, whether it be for offensive or defensive purposes, is simply not the answer to racist violence because it is costly, unnecessary, and futile. This section discusses King's first two objections along with Williams's responses to them and to the lead question.⁶⁶

Of course, King also had reasons for rejecting violence rooted in his principled normative commitments to nonviolence. These were shaped by his Christian theology and by his study of Gandhi, who he described as "the first person in history to lift the love ethic of Jesus above mere interaction between individuals to a powerful and effective social force on a large scale."⁶⁷ And, King adds: "It was in this Gandhian emphasis on love and nonviolence that I discovered the method for social reform that I had been seeking for so many months."⁶⁸ I have no qualms with those who say that these moral reasons are King's most powerful ones for rejecting community organized armed self-defense. But there is no denying that he also offered strategic and tactical reasons, particularly in later years after many civil rights struggles, and when King felt forced to respond directly to persistent frustrations that many black people had with his nonviolent approach, and to people like Williams and the Deacons for Defense who were advocating for armed self-defense within the civil rights movement. I pay special attention to these reasons in this section.⁶⁹

King observes, in 1959, that frustration with progress in the black quest for genuine citizenship produces two types of collective reactions: *peaceful resistance* and *violent retaliation*. Disciples of the former were committed to social organization and using nonviolent measures to resist those standing in the way of racial progress and civil rights. Proponents of the latter, in contrast, relied upon socially organized violence to avenge racial wrongs and black suffering in the first

⁶⁵ Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 50.

⁶⁶ I will attend to the futility objection in Lecture II.

⁶⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), 84.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 84-85.

⁶⁹ I will engage with his moral defense of nonviolence in Lecture II, where I contrast Williams's differences with King on what dignity consists in and its relationship to armed self-defense.

instance, and only secondarily to achieve progress.⁷⁰ King believed that some proponents of taking up arms including members of the Black Power movement shared this “anger-motivated” commitment to violent armed resistance for revenge.⁷¹ While this may have accurately described some people, it certainly did not correctly describe everyone advocating for ASD. Perhaps realizing that this could be an uncharitable characterization of the motives of others like Williams, King offers further classification that facilitates raising more pointed concerns about armed self-defense.

He identifies three approaches to violence: pure nonviolence, defensive violence, and strategic violence.⁷² King is likely imagining cases in which people are engaging in peaceful protest or civil disobedience, as was the case, for instance, during the Montgomery bus boycott in Selma, Alabama, and are being confronted by violent and armed assailants who oppose them and their just causes. In other words, in step with Williams, King is contemplating cases involving “Villainous Aggressors.”⁷³ *Pure nonviolence* (NV) prepares people to handle these violent attacks so that they can endure some evil for the sake of conquering a greater one and, says King, this path is not for the weak because it takes extraordinary discipline and courage.

King realizes that this response to violence is very difficult to sell to the black masses, especially when they are being besieged by brutally violent racists, still he insists that NV is superior morally, strategically, and tactically to the other alternatives. A King aide reportedly had this to say: “Nonviolence as a way of life was just as foreign to blacks as flying a space capsule would be to a roach.”⁷⁴ And other civil rights activists including James Farmer who, like King, was a strong advocate of nonviolent mass civil rights struggle, also appreciated the uphill battle they faced convincing a skeptical black public. Farmer documents this representative black reaction to calls for nonviolence: “You mean that if someone hits you, you’re not going to hit back? What are you, some kind of nut or something?”⁷⁵ So anticipating the accusation of being uncharitable in understanding why some blacks called for taking up arms against racist violence, King further distinguishes between two types of violent responses.

⁷⁰ Williams, *Negroes with Guns*, 12.

⁷¹ On philosophical accounts that impose an intent condition on justifiable self-defense having the wrong motive – as one’s primary intention – could impugn the morally permissibility of such resistance. See, e.g., Shannon Brandt Ford, “Rights-Based Justifications for Self-Defense: Defending a Modified Unjust Threat Account,” *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 36 (2022): 49-65.

⁷² Williams, *Negroes with Guns*, 12-13.

⁷³ Judith Jarvis Thomson, “Self-Defense,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 20 (1991): 283-310.

⁷⁴ Quoted in Simon Wendt, “‘Urge People Not to Carry Guns’: Armed Self-Defense in the Louisiana Civil Rights Movement and the Radicalization of the Congress of Racial Equality,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 45 (2004): 261-286, 267.

⁷⁵ James Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart: An Autobiography of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Arbor House, 1985), 109. Also quoted in Wendt, “Urge People Not to Carry Guns,” 265.

Defensive violence (DV) involves using an instrument of force to protect one's person, other persons, and property. It is, says King, exercising violence in self-defense. He concedes that this type of violence has widespread appeal, is generally sanctioned by law and morals, and is even condoned, under certain circumstances, by advocates of NV such as Gandhi. *Strategic violence* (SV), on the other hand, involves a deliberate use of instruments of force, organized akin to warfare, to pursue justice, equality, freedom or to resist racial oppression and white supremacy. Presumably, this is always condemned by advocates of NV.

Putting human life at risk is among the perils of SV. Persons engaging in such violence can perish and so can those who are its targets. These were costs. King believed that the black struggle for freedom could not be won by blacks alone. They needed sympathetic white allies willing to struggle with them in some cases, and unwilling to oppose them in others. But, just as important, blacks also needed to ensure that selected strategies of struggle did not alienate members of their own racial group. So, he worried that calls for SV would dissuade many blacks from joining the movement. These were also costs. And because King placed so much importance on building a mass movement for rights and freedom, it is not surprising that he identifies a failure to attract sufficient numbers of blacks, and members of a "large uncommitted middle group," to the collective struggle as the greatest danger of SV.⁷⁶

To these considerable costs – putting life at risk and alienating allies – he adds two more concerns, namely, that calls for SV may mislead blacks into thinking that violent resistance is the *only* path to freedom, and that such resistance may risk drawing them into a form of combat with an adversary that has them out-manned and out-gunned thereby dooming them from the start. King believed, therefore, that SV was unnecessary and futile, in addition to being too costly. This worry about the futility of SV, which he also raises in connection with DV, is significant. I shall address it at length, along with a way that Williams can respond, in my second lecture.

Scholars have studied what some may describe as the "radicalization" of civil rights organizations during the tumultuous 1960s. This radical turn can be linked to shifting strategies and philosophies regarding how best to pursue civil rights, human rights, and other rights, which assign armed resistance a more prominent place in the struggle.⁷⁷ Writing during this period, King made a similar observation, noting that some devotees of Black Power were increasingly attracted to retaliatory violence (a form of strategic violence).⁷⁸ And in his final book, *Where Do We Go From Here:*

⁷⁶ Williams, *Negroes with Guns*, 13.

⁷⁷ Akinyele O. Umoja, "The Ballot and the Bullet: A Comparative Analysis of Armed Resistance in the Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of Black Studies* 29 (1999): 558-578.

⁷⁸ Martin Luther King Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), 56.

Chaos or Community?, King further develops his concerns about the costliness, necessity, and futility of violence.

While the main focus of his critique is SV, King argues that DV is susceptible to comparable concerns. In addition to putting human life at risk, though perhaps to a lesser extent, DV also seems equally unnecessary, says King, because it is not the only path to achieve desired civil rights goals.⁷⁹ He allows that DV may, in the best case scenario, be able to win over prospective allies who see defensive resistance as virtuous. Persons engaged in DV may rightly be viewed as manifesting the virtues of courage and self-respect, which could attract more allies to the collective struggle. However, King argues that it would remain a questionable strategy within the context of a civil rights movement. He worries that while DV is a less objectionable option than SV because the line between it and SV (which is more aggressive in nature) is so thin, it is too easy for DV to be perceived as aggressive violence and to invite aggression in return.⁸⁰ And this likely outcome will, inevitably, compromise the overall effectiveness of the freedom struggle making it an ill-advised collective strategy.⁸¹

Lastly, to complete King's case for why armed self-defense or any type of defensive violence is not the answer to violent racism, we should also consider the normative principle supporting his targeted critique of DV. It is put to work in the Black Power chapter. Here he argues that DV contravenes this principle. King registers the distinction between calls for aggressive violence, which he takes to be clearly objectionable, and for defensive violence, which he describes as a "false issue" raised by critics of NV.⁸² And he makes the point that there is a normatively significant difference between exercising self-defense (armed or otherwise) outside of a civil rights demonstration and doing so within one.⁸³ DV is, on his view, morally impermissible during civil rights demonstrations. King bases this on the principle that it is better to endure a lesser evil for the sake of eradicating a greater one. I shall call this the *Principle of Lesser Evil* (POLE).

⁷⁹ King's concern about DV may cut deeper. It could turn out that DV, in some instances, only yields a marginal gain in preserving human life, or at worst no gain at all. This becomes a concern if there are defensive escalations, where what starts out as minor defensive violence quickly escalates into major and more aggressive violence. For an analysis of such cases, see Gerald Lang, "Defensive Escalations," *The Journal of Ethics* 26 (2022): 273-294. One could, of course, argue, as Lang does, that such escalations may be justified in certain circumstances. But this is still grist for King's mill because the point is that violent responses, whether strategic or defensive, put human life at risk. And if the very real possibility of defensive escalations narrows the loss-of-life gap between SV and DV then so much the worse for the latter.

⁸⁰ King, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, 57-58.

⁸¹ This "thin line" argument bridges King's concerns about necessity and futility. When I take up the latter, in Lecture II, I shall make the point that even if ASD is doomed to fail it could still be necessary.

⁸² King, *Where Do We Go From Here*, 57.

⁸³ James Farmer also distinguished between ASD outside of the movement and within it to dispel the appearance of inconsistency with his openness to DV for self-defense. See Wendt, "Urge People Not to Carry Guns," 280.

He reasons as follows. The point of civil rights demonstrations is, generally speaking, to achieve a just cause such as ending school segregation based on race. And while there will be Villainous Aggressors who resist and resort to unlawful violence, causing wrongful harm, demonstrators ought not respond to these attacks with defensive violence. Doing so will hinder the realization of the just cause, presumably, for reasons pertaining to his aforementioned worry about pushing away potential allies in eradicating the greater evil.⁸⁴ To be sure, those under attack (Innocent Victims) have an interest in not being assaulted, not being hit by rocks as they peacefully march for school desegregation, but their interest must be assigned a lower priority in such circumstances. “It is better to shed a little blood from a blow on the head or a rock thrown by an angry mob,” says King, “than to have children by the thousands finishing high school who can only read at a sixth-grade level.”⁸⁵ By similar reasoning, he might also say that it is better to shed a little blood from a gunshot wound from the gun of a Villainous Aggressor than to have this same outcome. These conclusions follow from POLE.

King presents a powerful case for why, on his view, armed self-defense or any type of defensive violence is not the answer to the racist violence of Villainous Aggressors within a civil rights demonstration. He argues that it is costly, unnecessary, futile and that it contravenes a weighty normative principle. How might Williams respond to these concerns? Let us start with two points about the foregoing argument.

First, King’s reasoning assumes that the interest Innocent Victims have in not being assaulted must be assigned a lower priority. But Williams can dispute this. Some philosophers have argued that the justification for self-defense rests upon a defender being entitled to assign serious weight to their interest in self-defense. In step with this, if we view the right to self-defense as an act-specific agent-relative prerogative, which allows a defender to assign proportionately greater weight to their interest in self-defense in some circumstances, than would otherwise be warranted by an impersonal standard, then King’s assumption can be rejected.⁸⁶ Williams could insist that the severity of the circumstances, and the threat they pose to vital interests in survival, must ultimately dictate whether an agent chooses to exercise her prerogative of armed self-defense or to forego doing so. One could object that civil

⁸⁴ We can, of course, speculate about the reasons why potential allies might be pushed away. They might think that self-defense is not warranted in a particular case. They might think that demonstrators who use it are unduly provoking aggressors giving them just cause to attack. But King could also add another dimension to this response, which is not about pushing allies away, so to speak, but about missing the opportunity to gain their respect or admiration. If potential allies believe that self-defense is warranted, and Innocent Victims refrain from defensive violence, their discipline to suffer violence may be viewed as supererogatory and deserving of special moral praise and support for their cause.

⁸⁵ King, *Where Do We Go From Here*, 57.

⁸⁶ Uwe Steinhoff, “Self-Defense as Claim Right, Liberty, and Act-Specific Agent-Relative Prerogative,” *Law and Philosophy* 35 (2016): 193-209, 207-209.

rights demonstrators make a pledge of nonviolence when they agree to participate in nonviolent civil rights demonstrations and thus this implies a consensual waiver of their right to self-defense with full knowledge of the risks that they may suffer harm.

But Williams could insist that a person retains their prerogative, even in this case, and that the decision to exercise it or not depends on what they are up against. While some demonstrators may be willing to endure spitting, slurs, kicking and punching, they may be unwilling to endure escalations of violence that include Villainous Aggressors trying to stab or shoot them. And some of them may be unwilling to endure must less than this. Furthermore, even if we agree that Innocent Victim's interest should be assigned a lower priority, this does not rule out resorting to defensive violence. Because here we might accommodate King's point by imposing a further normative constraint on the violence. For instance, we can proscribe that the defender where possible, without risking undue costs on self or others, aim to inflict as little harm as possible to the Villainous Aggressor.⁸⁷

King's concerns about DV being unnecessary and costly can be connected. Necessity is a condition of justified self-defense, according to philosophical orthodoxy. Williams take this for granted and presumes that this also applies to armed self-defense. With this starting point, the main burden of his survival argument is to elaborate on when, and under what conditions, ASD is necessary. King does not appear to dispute this necessity premise, though he clearly denies that defensive violence is necessary. However, when King raises the issue of necessity, he is, at least in the first instance, asking whether there is an alternative to defensive violence and taking issue with Williams on this point. "Mr. Robert Williams would have us believe that there is no collective and practical alternative," says King, "[Williams] argues that we must be cringing and submissive or take up arms."⁸⁸ Because King believes that NV is such an alternative, one that is both meaningful and attractive, King concludes that defensive violence is unnecessary. He supports this point by citing cases of nonviolent demonstrations in America that succeeded at realizing important civil rights goals. And alongside this he considers India's success, through Gandhi's leadership, in combating colonialism with nonviolence.

But King's case is misleading. Williams does not embrace a false dichotomy. And he offers two lines of response. The first one relies upon a different gloss on the issue of necessity. Williams agrees with King that defensive violence is not the only path. There are clearly other options apart from complete submission including, as King insists, NV. However, assuming that these options for responding to racist violence have different costs and benefits, Williams surmises that the more precise question is whether NV is, on balance, a less costly alternative to DV. And he thinks that this

⁸⁷ Kamm, "Self-Defense, Resistance, and Suicide: The Taliban Women."

⁸⁸ Williams, *Negroes with Guns*, 13.

is not obviously the case while King disagrees. So, this is the real question at issue according to Williams. And I am inclined to agree.

I said that Williams had two avenues of response to the issue of necessity raised by King. The first, which we just considered, had to do with reframing the real question at issue as one having to do with the relative costs of available options rather than with the mere existence of options. The second turns on stressing the importance of distinguishing between circumstances that are more or less ideal when deciding about the necessity of armed self-defense. I will develop this response more fully in my third lecture. Suffice it to say for now, with respect to the lead question of this section, the basic point is this: while armed self-defense may not be a necessary option under more ideal circumstances, when blacks can count on law to protect them from Villainous Aggressors, in a less ideal world where this is not the case – and the law of the jungle prevails putting black survival at stake – the strategy of responding to racist violence must be more flexible, and armed self-defense, while not *the* answer must certainly be part of an overall response to racist violence.⁸⁹ And this is the case both outside of civil rights demonstrations and within the context of such demonstrations.

As Williams, and others saw it, having armed defense guards do a host of things including but not limited to escorting civil rights organizers, guarding gathering places such as homes, churches, community centers, and offices, and monitoring nonviolent demonstrations all counted as incorporating ASD within civil rights demonstrations to work in tandem with nonviolent tactics. Civil rights activists like James Lawson, who had an unwavering philosophical commitment to NV, seeing it not as a tactic but as a moral way of life, which demanded personal sacrifice and suffering to bring about a more just world, rejected ASD altogether. The most we could do is pray for our aggressors, according to Lawson, even as they punched, kicked, and spat upon us. To be sure, he faced tough questions from those skeptical of philosophical nonviolence. A SNCC activist once asked Lawson, “how love would help him survive when being shot at by white racists.”⁹⁰

By the mid-1960s, civil rights activists were much more vocal about rejecting NV as a way of life rather than as a necessary strategy for long term racial progress goals. And some of these activists with a longstanding commitment to NV such as James Forman, having witnessed the extreme brutality of racist violence in places such as the rural Mississippi Delta, came to acknowledge the absolute necessity of armed self-defense within civil rights demonstrations. From this perspective, which was long shared by Williams, the Deacons for Defense, and many others, ASD was not at odds with tactical NV but, more accurately, served to bolster people’s

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Simon Wendt, *The Spirit and The Shotgun: Armed Resistance and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2007), 115.

commitment to it. “Knowing that armed defenders were nearby,” reports one historian, “frequently bolstered the determination of blacks to continue protests despite the omnipresence of menacing whites.”⁹¹ Williams could claim this as a significant benefit of DV.

V. Conclusion

Robert Williams grants an important point to pacifist critics preaching a philosophical commitment to nonviolence in the civil rights struggle. “Nonviolence is a powerful weapon in the struggle against social evil,” he concedes. But it cannot be the only weapon in our arsenal. Because when we are inflexible in our commitment to nonviolence – holding fast to it even for tactical purposes – we may be unable to defend our interests in survival against adversaries who have “minds warped by racism.”⁹² Having served as a U. S. Marine during World War II, Williams witnessed the consequences of Hitler’s racism firsthand. “When Hitler’s tyranny threatened the world,” Williams observed, “we did not hear very much about how immoral it is to meet violence with violence.”⁹³ Living among racist white supremacists in the deep South, whose violent aggression seemed boundless against black people, and their allies, struggling for civil rights, Williams clearly thought that the same kind of restraint was warranted.

The focus in these lectures is not on the role of violence in eradicating “social evil,” to use Williams’s language, but on armed self-defense as a weapon for defending vital interests in survival against such evil. And for this reason some people may find Williams’s war analogy off the mark. Moreover, in both the war, and the Southern racists, cases some people may think that meeting violence with violence is immoral but allow that these considerations could be outweighed by competing ones which support violent responses on balance. However, one can also think, as Williams does, that meeting violence with (defensive) violence is moral under certain circumstances. As we work our way toward discerning these circumstances, we will wonder what kind of normative considerations can be marshalled to support Williams’s case for ASD. Taking up his appeals to rights and dignity are good places to start.

In addition to believing that armed self-defense is a dignified form of resistance, Williams assumes that there is a right to armed self-defense. Furthermore, he assumes that this right is triggered when the law of the jungle prevails and government fails to protect. Under these nonideal circumstances, it becomes necessary to exercise this right, even within the context of civil rights struggles. King

⁹¹ Ibid., 194.

⁹² Williams, *Negroes with Guns*, 110.

⁹³ Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 214.

resists this view by pointing out the futility of taking up arms. “In a violent racial situation,” says King, “the power structure has the local police, the state troopers, the national guard and finally the army to call on, all of which are predominately white.”⁹⁴ Thus any effort by blacks to take up arms either for strategic violence or defensive violence is bound to fail. Attending to Williams’s views about armed self-defense and dignity, taking up this futility objection, advancing an analysis of the right to armed self-defense that fruitfully captures Williams’s view, and explaining how this right extends to defense of others and, somewhat more controversially, to defense of property are the main tasks for my second lecture.

⁹⁴ King, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, 60.