

The morality of torture in wartime essay

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It is astonishing, especially at first, to make the case for torture. The idea of torture is itself painful to many people; the idea of causing harm to extract information from another human being is, to most, distressing on a fundamental level. However, in recent years, there has been a growing drive among members of the military to include torture in the arsenal of tools that military personnel can use to extract information from prisoners, particularly prisoners of war in active war zones (Saletan).

There are a variety of problems with making the case for torture, not the least of which is the moral problem with allowing the use of torture.

However, before addressing the problems with utilizing torture, it is important to look at the situations in which proponents of torture believe the use of torture to be appropriate. Bagaric and Clarke suggest that “Torture is permissible when evidence suggests that this is the only means, due to the immediacy of the situation, to save the life of an innocent person” (Bagaric and Clarke). There is an inherent problem with this definition: the person or persons who will be carrying out the torture have no real guarantee that the victim of the torture truly has the information in question. If torture is indeed utilized against an individual and it turns out that he or she does not have the information in question, then a great harm has been committed against that individual, a wrong that cannot be undone or made right again.

In addition, there is a very real likelihood that the power to abuse and torture individuals will be abused by those in power. In *The Lucifer Effect*, renowned psychologist Philip Zimbardo recalls his famous Stanford Prison Experiment, in which normal college students quickly fell into the roles of torturers when they failed to be held accountable to a higher authority (Zimbardo). When

torture is an option and the application of torture is not restricted and controlled, torturers can easily become carried away by the psychological intensity of the situation (Zimbardo). This is not conjecture-- the so-called “Lucifer effect” is a well-documented psychological phenomenon that occurs across all populations.

Another practical problem that is faced when torture is advocated and legitimized is the proper type of torture to apply. If certain types of torture-- sexualized torture, for instance, or torture that causes lasting physical harm-- are not legitimized by the government or by authority figures, then intellectually the government has not truly declared torture as a legitimate means for obtaining information. Torture is, by nature, partly psychological; the fear and danger of torture is somewhat lessened if a victim knows that the torture will not end in his or her death. This is not to say that those in power should be given free reign to torture; on the contrary, the cognitive dissonance between “appropriate” torture and “inappropriate” torture indicates that those in power recognize that torture is not appropriate or ethical for use.

When torture is used to “save an innocent life,” there is often some moral justification that goes along with the application of torture. However, in reality, this is merely a thought experiment; the world is not so black and white. Torturing one person for information rarely results in the kind of good-world outcome that Bagaric and Clarke seem to indicate happens frequently. This is what Zimbardo refers to as a just-world fallacy; people want to believe that there is cosmic balance, but this is rarely the case.

Justifying torture is something that is morally reprehensible, but also

practically inefficient. There is no way to regulate torture, and there is no way to ensure that torture and those carrying out the torture are doing so “for the right reasons.” Torture should be relegated to the Medieval Ages, not utilized in the modern world by forward-thinking nations.

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