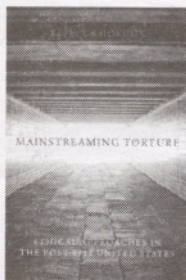


Philosopher eviscerates arguments for 'enhanced interrogation'

BY MIKE WOLD
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST



Mainstreaming Torture: Ethical Approaches in the Post-9/11 United States By Rebecca Gordon

A terrorist threatens to blow up an elementary school with all the kids inside it. Agent X doesn't know which school it is, but knows who the bomber is. There's only one hour to get the information out of the terrorist. What alternative is there but torture?

That's the kind of scenario that's been posed again and again since the 9/11 attacks, corollary to the oft-repeated phrase that "the gloves are off now" and the idea that we must do anything to prevent other attacks, even if it means ignoring our own values.

The scenario, of course, is absurd; something that would likely never happen. How could you be sure that this one guy knows which school is the target? And why wouldn't you just evacuate all the elementary schools in the city?

According to ethicist Rebecca Gordon in "Mainstreaming Torture," the usual arguments, for or against, miss the real problem with torture. They argue from the immediate consequences or likelihood of the scenario, ignoring the broader implications of living in a society that practices torture. Torture cannot be understood as isolated incidents carried out to get specific information by people who wouldn't otherwise torture. Torture is a practice. It requires skill. A kind of twisted form of medicine and psychology, it cannot be effectively carried out by amateurs. Since torture requires skill, it requires experience, gained by routinely torturing people. It also requires maintaining an infrastructure: holding cells, guards, medical support and a legal apparatus to protect the torturers.

Torture, both before and after 9/11, is a practice with a long history of institutional support in the United States. Before 9/11, it was less acknowledged and mainly carried out in prisons or by the CIA, which has been studying and experimenting with

various methods of breaking people down and restructuring their personalities since the 1950s. The main change after 9/11 is that it became acceptable to publicly advocate torture, even though sometimes, with a nod and a wink, the government pretended that practices like hanging somebody by his wrists for days, waterboarding, prolonged isolation and long-term sleep deprivation weren't really torture. This allowed senior officials to both advocate torture and insist that the U.S. doesn't practice torture.

While torture may incidentally generate some useful intelligence, it also generates false intelligence; somebody who's being tortured will eventually say whatever he or she thinks the torturers want. Gordon argues that for states that practice torture, the function of torture is not primarily to get at the truth; rather, it is to "establish" the truth as understood by the government. Thus, in the lead-up to the Iraq War, the top echelons of the Bush administration pushed to have al-Qaida suspects admit to a link between them and Saddam Hussein. Many times, somebody who is being tortured will give up some piece of information, only to be told, "We already knew that."

The other major function of torture is to make people afraid, either of the possibility of being tortured or of the "others" who are tortured, since they must have committed horrible crimes to deserve such treatment.

Gordon says that torture is not only a "practice" in the common use of the term, but also a kind of twisted practice in the philosophical sense. In the ethical philosophy she draws on, a practice is a traditional set of skills carried out by a body of people who are working on the way to do something in the best way possible, resulting in the general good. Torture, however, is a "false" practice, a traditional skill carried out by a body of people trying to do something in the best way possible, for a purpose that degrades the humanity of

those who are tortured, corrupts the torturers themselves and debases the society that allows torture to take place.

In a torture regime, "virtues" are turned upside down. The courage to risk one's life is replaced by the courage to ignore one's conscience. Justice is inverted: "In institutionalized state torture, by definition, only the guilty are tortured. Torture... subverts the usual... order of justice, in which trial precedes penalty... The victim is punished before, and often instead of, receiving a trial... By torturing someone, we prove... he or she deserves to be tortured." Those who are tortured — and the population from which they are drawn — are inevitably dehumanized.

Although based on a dissertation and using some technical philosophical terms, "Mainstreaming Torture" is generally well-written and accessible. It makes compelling arguments against the ideas that we need to torture people to prevent terrorist attacks or that we can accept the torture of enemies or prisoners without it eroding the fabric of our own society. As well as our own experience since 9/11, Gordon draws on the history of the French in Algeria and of Latin America in the 1980s to illuminate the path that we're going down. It's not a pretty one. As Gordon puts it, "the entire content of this book could be expressed in five words: Torture is wrong. Stop it."

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