
The Existence Of Torture In Liberal Society

The definition of torture is split. The malleability of the term “serious pain or distress” in the heart of this definition has created the condition in which the reality agrees on these texts but may not agree on their meaning. This “I remember it when I think it” nature of this discourse of torture makes it clear that this explanation is mostly left to the eye of the beholder. This is especially difficult when international law's dependence on self-enforcement is thought. After talking about new misconceptions about information gathering and coercion that are familiar to all sides of the torture argument, the section depicts the world of power collection. It then reviews the broad range of competing definitions of torture: Those offered by foreign courts, those suggested by observers, and those applied by governments in the globe.

I am arguing that torture is a microcosm, raised to the highest level of intensity, of the tyrannical political relationships that liberalism hates the most. I have said that torture isolates and privatizes. Pain forcibly severs our concentration on anything outside of us; it collapses our horizon to our own body and the damage we feel in it. Even much milder sensations of prolonged discomfort can distract us so much that it becomes impossible to pay attention to anything else, as anyone knows who has had to go to the bathroom in a situation where it cannot be done. Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote that the world of the happy is different from the world of the unhappy, and this is not simply a figure of speech when we suffer severe pain. The world of the man or woman in great pain is a world without relationships or engagements, a world without an exterior. It is a world reduced to a point, a world that makes no sense and in which the human soul finds no home and no repose.

I do not mean to diminish how horrible these experiences are, nor do I mean to suggest that American interrogators never go further than torture lite. Waterboarding, withholding of pain medication from wounded captives, putting lit cigarettes in their ears, rape, and beatings all go much further. At least five, and maybe more than twenty captives have been beaten to death by American interrogators. My point is rather that liberals generally draw the line at forms of torture that maim the victim's body. This, like the limitation of torture to intelligence gathering, marks an undeniable moderation in torture, the world's most immoderate practice. It's almost enough to persuade us that torture lite is not torture at all, or at least that it isn't cruel enough to make liberals wince, at least not when the stakes are sufficiently high. Indeed, they may even deny that it is torture.

Interrogators do not inhabit a world of loving kindness, or of equal concern and respect for all human beings. Interrogating resistant prisoners non-violently and non-abusively still requires a relationship that in any other context would be morally abhorrent. It requires tricking information

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out of the subject, and the interrogator does this by setting up elaborate scenarios to disorient the subject and propel him into an alternative reality. The subject must be deceived into thinking that his high-value intelligence has already been revealed by someone else, so that it is no longer of any value. He must be fooled into thinking that his friends have betrayed him or that the interrogator is his friend. The interrogator disrupts his sense of time and place, disorients him with sessions that never take place at predictable times or intervals, and manipulates his emotions. The very names of interrogation techniques show this: 'Emotional Love,' 'Emotional Hate,' 'Fear Up Harsh,' 'Fear Up Mild,' 'Reduced Fear,' 'Pride and Ego Up,' 'Pride and Ego Down,' 'Futility.'⁶² The interrogator may set up a scenario to make the subject think he is in the clutches of a much-feared secret police organization from a different country. Every bit of the subject's environment is fair game for manipulation and deception, as the interrogator aims to create the total lie that gets the subject talking.⁶³ Let me be clear that I am not objecting to these deceptions. None of these practices rises to the level of abuse or torture lite, let alone torture heavy, and surely tricking the subject into talking is legitimate if the goals of the interrogation are legitimate. But what I have described is a relationship of totalitarian mind-control more profound than the world of Orwell's 1984. The interrogator is like Descartes' Evil Deceiver, and the subject lives in a false reality reminiscent of The Matrix. The liberal fiction that interrogation can be done by people who are neither cruel nor tyrannical runs aground on the fact that regardless of the interrogator's character off the job, on the job, every fiber of his concentration is devoted to dominating the mind of the subject. Only one thing prevents this from turning into abuse and torture, and that is a clear set of bright-line rules, drummed into the interrogator with the intensity of a religious indoctrination, complete with warnings of fire and brimstone. American interrogator Chris Mackey reports that warnings about the dire consequences of violating the Geneva Conventions 'were repeated so often that by the end of our time at training school the three syllables 'Leaven-worth' were ringing in our ears.

The only reasonable inference to draw from these recent efforts by the government to defend its actions is that the torture culture is still firmly in place, notwithstanding official condemnation of torture. Indeed, given that lawyers at the highest levels of government continue to loophole the laws against torture as energetically as ever, more than half a year after the Abu Ghraib revelations, the only reasonable inference to draw is that the United States government is currently engaging in brutal and humiliating interrogations. At most, torture has given way to CID. The persistence of interrogational brutality should surprise no one, because the liberal ideology of torture fully legitimizes it. The memos illustrate the ease with which arguments that pretend that torture can exist in liberal society, but only as an exception, quickly lead to erecting a torture culture, a network of institutions and practices that regularize the exception and make it standard operating procedure hence the reason as to why I don't like torture.

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