

U3A Radlett and District Philosophy Group

Report of meeting on 15th August 2013

The subject for discussion was "Should intelligence gained by torture not be used, even if it saves lives?"

The question

First it was established that the question was not "Can torture ever be justified" but "Should intelligence gained by torture not be used..." This seemed to some to accept torture, turning the question on itself. Various quotes and situations showed the relevance of the question: -

Quotes and examples

French General Bigeard told Le Figaro newspaper in 2000 that the device (torture) was useful for loosening tongues and securing information which could save lives.

The suspected terrorist, Muslim cleric Abu Qatada's extradition from Britain to Jordan was delayed due to claims that evidence gained by torture would be used against him.

In WW2 Churchill faced the dilemma of revealing the British ability to break the Enigma and Ultra codes by using information gained through the code breaking to save the population of Coventry. He did not use the information and Coventry was destroyed. The breaking of the code was said to have shortened the war by two years.

Sir John Sawers, head of MI6, in the Mail 29th October 2010

"We have to deal with the world as it is. Suppose we received credible intelligence that might save lives, here or abroad. We have a professional and moral duty to act on it.... If we hold back and don't pass that intelligence, out of concern that a suspect terrorist may be badly treated, innocent lives may be lost that could have been saved. These are not abstract questions for philosophy courses...They are real, constant operational dilemmas."

Former head of MI5 Baroness Buller said in the 2011 Reith lecture "torture can contribute to saving lives." But went on to say that torture is "not something that is right, legal or moral to do"

Kahlil Gibran "So the wrong-doer cannot do wrong without the hidden will of you all"

The discussion

The following are comments made during the discussion. They are grouped under general headings.

The use of information gained by torture

We must use information to save lives, however it was gained

The end justifies the means if it saves lives

You encourage torture by using the information gained through it. You cannot use it

Does it encourage more torture?

There must be a tipping point. Would the potential loss of one life not justify torture but the threat of large scale loss of life, such as from an atomic bomb, condone it?

The morality of torture

You can get information in other ways. There is no need to use torture.

Are you prepared to let people die by not using the information?

If you are sure it's true, use it

It is similar to the dilemma of whether to pay a kidnap ransom

We cannot classify torture as one. Could it be justified if a child was kidnapped? I would be willing if it were my child

A tortured person is at the mercy of the torturer. It is subhuman. Allowing torture lowers us to the level of the terrorist or kidnapper

Not everyone plays by the rules. That doesn't mean that we shouldn't

If you were absolutely sure that you could save lives, would you torture?

Is verbal torture ok and physical torture not? They are not separate, they are the same. Both cause lasting damage

Torture is part and parcel of war

The UN convention 1984 and the Geneva Convention, amongst others, guide nations not to use torture.

History of torture

Torture is left over from the Middle Ages

Torture was used by the British in India and Africa. Apologies have been made to the Mau Mau

Customs were different then, lives were not valued. There was a conquering force

We should be able to learn from history

In the Falkland's war prisoners were threatened with tales of the kukri knife used by Ghurkhas

We are all implicated in torture and terrorism. The West armed the Mujahedeen.

Whoever is in power uses torture.

Types of torture

Torture is the breaking down of the will

The anticipation of torture and hearing others being tortured is effective torture in itself

Being in a police cell alone could feel like torture

Solitary confinement is torture

Starvation and force feeding are both torture

Bullying is torture

The use of silence in interrogation can be torture

Some men can withstand interrogation, but the sight and smell of a young woman will break them.

Those likely to be tortured are trained to resist interrogation

The Milgram electric shock experiment with US students showed ordinary people will follow orders, even to the extent of killing an innocent human being.

About torturers

Torturers must have no compassion

Things they have experienced can turn some people into torturers

Children can be very cruel

Some children that inflict pain on animals become torturers as adults

Conclusions

The majority changed their position during the discussion from being sure of their agreement or opposition to the use of intelligence gained from torture to a position that allowed it to be conditional. The conditions included the ability to save lives, especially of children, the failure to get the information by other means, the reliability of the intelligence, the nature of the torture and the availability of someone else to carry out the torture.

Recommended reading and films

Double Cross: The True Story of The D-Day Spies by Ben Macintyre

The Third World War: A Future History by General Sir John Hackett

The Guns of Navarone by Alistair MacLean

The Battle of Algiers

The Lost Command