

Blackwell Public Philosophy Series

Torture and the Ticking Bomb

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Discussion questions

Torture

- What is torture?
- What counts as torture?
- Do we need to define torture?

Morality and law

- What are the consequences of institutionalizing torture?
- Should anything morally repugnant be legally banned?
- Does it make sense to suppose that something morally repugnant should nonetheless be legally permitted?
- How important is the legal recognition of a practice for a society's likely moral attitude towards it?

Ticking bombs and philosophical thought experiments

- What exactly is "the ticking bomb scenario"?
- What conditions does the scenario ask us to imagine and how do they relate to one another?
- Is the scenario a mere fantasy?
- What part, if any, should philosophical fantasy play in informing social and political policy?

Consequentialism

- Do genuine real-life cases (eg Gāfgen) show that torture is sometimes justifiable?
- Do they show that a consequentialist view of morality is untenable?

- Do they show that an absolutist view of morality is untenable?
- If you're a consequentialist about morality, can you legitimately invoke non-consequentialist "acceptable moral principles" to limit the impact of a consequentialist approach?

Individual and society

- What impact, if any, should empirical claims or speculations about what you or I would do in a given case have on social policy? For instance, if you would, or think you would, beat the daylights out of someone who attacked your child, does that suggest that beating the daylights out of them is morally justifiable?
- Can you legitimately demand that others (torturers; executioners; soldiers; police; firefighters; mountain rescue teams) do things that you yourself would not be prepared to learn to do?
- If you think Dershowitz is right, would you be prepared to learn to torture?

Hypocrisy

- Given that our governments train and employ professional torturers, should we stop pretending otherwise and seek tighter regulation of their activities?
- Does it make any difference whether we recognise and deplore the fact that our governments do so or recognise and accept that they'll do so whatever we think?

The slippery slope

- Would legalizing interrogational torture be likely to lead to the greater use and acceptance of torture for other purposes?
- How important are the unintended consequences of legal and/or social policy?
- How important are the intended consequences of legal and/or social policy on areas not themselves the direct objects of the law or policy in question?
- What, if anything, is the symbolic importance of prohibition?