

# The Social Consequences of the Torture Discourse

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Ludwig Wittgenstein, commenting on the inability of philosophy to change the use of language, claimed that philosophy “leaves everything as it is”(Wittgenstein 1953; 49). This came as an attack on the dream of philosophers and social scientists to change the world and has been interpreted as a call for researchers to set more modest goals (Winch 2008). In the past, most intellectuals wrote as though their ideas could change the world, or at least that they might influence those who had the power to initiate change. In the twentieth century, outshone by modern science and attacked by skeptics, most philosophers and social theorists abandoned their transformative goals and retreated into more specialized work as conceptual analysts or as experts in particular theoretical domains. It is in the latter role that philosophy still finds a voice outside academia. Though philosophers’ utopian narratives often have little influence, more specialized scholarly work linked to specific problems plays an important part in shaping perception. The work of moral philosophers working on particular problems like stem cell research, eugenics, and abortion, continue to receive attention. These discussions have merit, but in the debate over the morality of torture, what appears to be unbiased analysis, helps to maintain the atmosphere of

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constant threat that is characteristic of the War on Terror. When it comes to scholars giving legitimacy to prisoner abuse, it would be better if Wittgenstein's insight were accurate.

Scholars usually only have indirect influence on social life, but they are not isolated from the world. Their analyses and debates become part of the world they describe and it is essential that the connection be recognized. Scholars should not be forbidden from discussing certain topics, but their discussions should be seen for what they are – arguments made in the context of broader discourses, which lend legitimacy to real policies. Žižek argues that introducing torture as a legitimate subject for discussion may be more dangerous than actually advocating torture because of the ideological distortion in claiming to speak neutrally about prisoner abuse. “[S]uch debates, such exhortations to ‘keep an open mind’, should be the sign for every authentic liberal that the terrorists are winning” (Žižek 2002; 103). We expect scholarly debates to be more nuanced and neutral than discussions in the media and in government, and they often are. However, many of the discussions of terrorism and torture fall far short of ideal neutrality (Carlsmith 2008). Whether they realize it or not, the academics who work to justify the use of torture in the war on terror join a long line of “fellow travelers” whose work is instrumental in justifying immoral policies. The power fellow travelers have had in generating support for past American wars shows that they are not insulated from the political world.

Scholars, especially moral philosophers, are particularly important in the war on terror because of the centrality of ethical dilemmas. Torture was



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a regular tactic in counterterrorist operations during the 1990s (McCoy 2006; 109), but it was only after 9/11 that its use was publicized and serious debate about its morality and effects reemerged. The number of books and articles about torture increased dramatically when it was revealed that the Bush administration was using “enhanced interrogation” on suspected terrorists. What had hitherto been a settled topic reemerged as a point of contention. Torture was cast as a tactic to help win the fight against evil, as part of the Bush administration’s work in the war on terror to form a “merger of US foreign policy and ethical obligation.” (Hampton 2009; 12). Wherever the debate over torture takes place it is centered on the issues of effectiveness and morality. The effectiveness is difficult to determine, given the difficulty in conducting studies of torture, but the theoretical problem of morality is one that moral philosophers are adept at confronting.

Most people have no experience with torture. Reliable information about how its use and effects is limited. “[W]e really have no idea how reliable torture is as a way of obtaining information” (Levinson 2004; 33). The perception of torture is, therefore, shaped more by the way it is discursively constructed than by any facts about it. Because the discourse is largely divorced from the practice it describes, indeed, many of the scenarios involving torture bear little resemblance to reality, the way it is discussed has enormous potential to remake perceptions. The torture discourse like the discourse on terrorism in general, is based on a series of binary oppositions (Hampton 2009): good and evil, terrorists and nonterrorists. There is no middle ground and no wrongly accused – which is why extreme actions are



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always justified and no means of punishment considered off-limits. Even worse, in the debate over torture commentators tend to use apocalyptic language that casts the problem as a tradeoff between a small breach of morality and a catastrophic loss of life (Sluka 2008). Merely discussing torture, even if only in an academic journal or book, perpetuates a particular way of understanding the war on terror and lends credence to the ridiculous ticking bomb scenarios. Žižek's point can be made even stronger. It is not simply that the debate over torture may have some adverse consequences and lend support to the government; it also contributes to the atmosphere of uncertainty and constant threat that is itself a kind of mass psychological torture. It is psychological torture in the sense that it maintains a constant threat to individuals, whether guilty or innocent, and to fundamental liberal values.

## **The Role of Fellow Travelers**

The history of academics supporting interventionist foreign policy is far too long to account for here, but a few of the recent examples are worth mentioning as they are instances of a practice that is integral to building popular support for the war on terror. Noam Chomsky's fame as a political analyst began with his denunciation of the fellow travelers who supported the American war in Vietnam (Chomsky 2002, 1967). His primary targets were reporters and public intellectuals who supported the Vietnam War – those using their status as enlightened and neutral advisers to lend moral justification to a misguided war and tactics like defoliation and bombing



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civilians. Since Vietnam, much of Chomsky's work has focused on fellow travelers in other American military and economic ventures. There are several parallels between the justifications of American involvement in Vietnam and the contemporary discussion of torture: the framing of the debate in terms of good and evil, the assumption that American interests are just, and that the governments' actions are interpreted as benevolent even when they are violent and misdirected. He deserves much of the credit for drawing attention to these modes of framing.

The role of intellectuals in American public life is most notable during times of crisis. Under normal circumstances the academic world is usually divided from the rest of society, but when events occur that are so shocking that normal channels of communication cannot provide satisfactory answers, intellectuals are central to mobilizing public opinion. This is exactly what happened in the United States after 9/11; there was a crisis and experts were called upon to answer the nagging questions of why the attacks took place and what could be done about them. The war in Afghanistan started without much opposition, and therefore, without much need for justification, but the Iraq war required much help as it was contested from its inception. Debate began as soon as the intention to invade was announced and has never really ended. In the months leading up to the war there was a battle for public opinion in which the efforts of intellectuals was indispensable in mobilizing public support for the Bush Administration's war.

Following Chomsky's example, Bronner and Jacobson criticized the intellectuals who supported Bush's war, saying that these misguided



commentators must have been so taken in with the media spectacle of a glorious war against evil that they suspended critical judgment and abdicated their responsibilities (Bronner 2004). Like Chomsky's work on Vietnam, Bronner's and Jacobson's essay provides numerous examples of Leftist intellectuals rushing to support the war, often using sophisticated arguments that were ultimately ineffective because of the fundamental flaw in declaring war on a country with no direct link to the war on terror. This leads the authors to conclude that the media spectacle may have had a role in directing Bush's supporters.

The support for torturing suspected terrorists is often explicitly premised on movies and television programs in which torture is the key to foiling the terrorists' plot and stopping the ticking bomb seconds before detonation (Kim 2005; Yin 2008). Many politicians use their advocacy of torture as a means of appearing tough on terrorism and looking out for national security (Moghaddam 2007; 439), but their arguments are often weak and rely on the justification of experts or television programs. Except for John McCain, all the Republican presidential candidates in the 2008 election supported torture in some circumstances. Representative Tom Tancredo even said that in a national security emergency he would want Jack Bower, the fictional television hero who routinely tortures suspects, to handle the terrorists. Tancredo and the other defenders of torture portray themselves as realists – the only ones ready to use whatever means necessary to win, the ones ready to embrace the harsh reality that war is messy and cannot be won without some immorality. Nevertheless, these “realists” are surprisingly reliant on

fantasy and impossible counterfactuals. As Davis puts it, 'Realists pay surprisingly little attention to reality' (Davis 2005; 170).

Television programs and movies are particularly well suited for constructing a pro-torture message because they can depict abuse as morally unambiguous, effective, and always used against the guilty. The media creates an image of torture that relies on the same binaries as those that structure the war on terror discourse in general (Hampton 2009). It is a mark of the power of fantasy that politicians and scholars formulate their defenses of torture with thought experiments drawn from movies (Steinhoff 2006). Most of the support of torture is attributable to television programs and movies like 24, as these have a much larger audience than academics and even politicians. However, popular media refrains from formulating moral justifications for torture. This is a task for scholars, and although they have a smaller audience, they have a far greater power to convince by virtue of their status. Even when their research is flawed or their arguments are weak, scholarly support of a position can be enough to make it appear plausible. This is why the defense that just talking about a torture and defending it as an exercise in moral thought is so weak. The torture fellow travelers lend authoritative support to an illegal, immoral, and counterproductive tactic. In doing this, they help to make torture acceptable in the war on terror.

## The Defenders of Torture

The most famous contemporary defense of torture comes from Alan Dershowitz, who claims that he does not favor using torture, but does think that it should be legalized. He advocates legalization as a means of regulation (Dershowitz 2003). Rather than allowing torture to continue illegally, without restraint or supervision, Dershowitz thinks that we should bring it into the open and provide legal avenues for it to prevent torture from becoming excessive. He uses the typical, extreme ticking bomb scenarios to justify this claim and to make that point that there are cases in which torture is permissible. These examples are morally unambiguous cases in which there is a simple opposition between torturing a guilty man or letting thousands of civilians die – cases that teach us little about how to act in the real world. Far from making torture more humane, establishing laws based on cases that will probably never arise only creates more possibilities for abuse.

Many of the critiques of the pro-torture position rely on Dershowitz's position as the primary example. Žižek calls it argument "extremely dangerous" because "it gives legitimacy to torture, and thus opens the space for more illicit torture." (Žižek 2002; 103). As Lukes correctly points out, "Removing the general prohibition would dissolve inhibitions" and ultimately make torture more prevalent (Lukes 2005; 15). Even if we were to allow torture in extraordinary cases and excuse it on the basis some life-saving capacity, to institutionalize the practice is to establish a dangerous



precedent. This is not only a powerful argument against Dershowitz but against all those who defend torture, even if only in extreme circumstances. Dershowitz removes the prohibition by arguing that the use of torture should be legalized, but whether or not they argue for legalization, everyone who defends the practice legitimizes it as a permissible tactic. Dershowitz is only unique insofar as he has the courage to institutionalize the torture. Others make use of what Giorgio Agamben calls the “state of exception” (Agamben 2005) – the use of crises to justify a suspension of the law for the sake of the public good. Agamben does not endorse this as a way of acting, but does draw attention to how frequently politicians rely on this as a way of avoiding legal constraints.

The “state of exception” version of the pro-torture argument is far more common than Dershowitz’s formulation and comes in myriad forms, but they rely on the same basic premises. What is remarkable is the similarity of reasoning regardless of the perspective of the writer. In his popular argument for atheism and rational thought, Sam Harris defends torture in cases where it might save innocent lives (Harris 2005). His thought experiments are particularly surprising because they are cast in even more extreme terms than the usual choice between torture and allowing a bomb to explode. He seems to think that recasting the ticking bomb argument in the disproportionate terms does not change its utility. Michael Walzer, one of the foremost American political scientists, argues that politicians must be able to get their hands dirty in extreme circumstances, but that they do not become evil because they still wish that their actions were not necessary. In



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other words, their intention saves the acts from being as bad as they might be otherwise (Walzer 1973). Though he refrains from developing absurd ticking bomb scenarios to justify this, his reasoning is essentially the same as Harris'. Judge Richard Posner says that "only the most doctrinaire civil libertarians (not that there aren't plenty of them) deny that if the stakes are high enough, torture is permissible. No one who doubts that should be in a position of responsibility" (Posner 2004; 295). As this quotation shows, his defense also relies on the existence of a state of exception in which the law should be suspended, and his criterion for this threat is equally grounded in fantasy. Finally, Allhoff goes beyond other defenders of torture that rely on extreme cases and argues "that torture is, in some cases, morally required." (Allhoff; 245). This is a more extreme argument than the others, but the establishment of moral duty relies on the same implausible counterfactuals and binary framing.

Taking his example from the movie Dirty Harry, Uwe Steinhoff argues that Clint Eastwood's character is justified in inflicting pain on a captured criminal to discover the location of a kidnapped girl (Steinhoff 2006). This scenario is cast in more realistic terms than most others and is somewhat compelling for this reason, nevertheless, it relies on the same idealization as other cases – the clearly evil enemy, perfect knowledge about his intent, and an innocent victim. Cases like this may arise, but are unlikely to be the norm, especially in the war on terror, and are therefore misleading guides. More importantly, his scenario limits the problem to the parties immediately involved and clearly ignores the broader ramifications of the decision to

torture a prisoner: "The aggressor culpably brings about a situation where one of the two — he or the defender — will die. It is only just and fair that the harm that will befall in this situation upon one of the two is diverted to the person who is responsible for the harm — the aggressor" (Steinhoff 2006; 342). The excessive narrowness is shared by each of these defenders of torture and is more visible when we consider the role that arguments such as these have in the torture discourse. This one moral dilemma cannot be isolated from the larger social and psychological implications of reverting to prisoner abuse.

## The Power of Threats

Among the unifying characteristics of the defenses of torture are the reliance on implausible counterfactuals as evidence and the belief that torture can be discussed from a disinterested perspective. Žižek says that "explicit endorsement would be too shocking and therefore rejected, the mere introduction of torture as a legitimate topic allows us to entertain the idea while retaining a pure conscience" (Žižek 2002; 104). He may be right in saying that merely discussing torture is dangerous, but torture is far from being too shocking to advocate. A number of politicians and scholars openly advocate its use, provided the circumstances are right. They endorse abuse, but only as an abstract philosophical point or in the context of scenarios that will never arise, thus leaving a space between their advocacy and the actual use of torture. They differ from the fellow travelers of the wars in Vietnam and Iraq in that they present the argument as if it were detached from any

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context. However, the reemergence of the debate over torture is connected to the war on terror and, whether or not there is any explicit support of policies, an article or book advocating torture counts as a real act of support. Again, this does not mean that the debate should be silenced. We should only see that defenses of torture framed as purely academic are not really detached from its use in practice. Moreover, the discourse on terror helps to sustain a state of permanent psychological terror that has persisted for nearly a decade. The open advocacy of abuse whenever it might lead to a favorable outcome plays a central role in spreading the post-9/11 fear. We should see the endorsement of torture as a form of mild psychological torture since it shares a number of key similarities with psychological abuse of prisoners.

Broadly speaking, there are two forms of torture: physical and psychological. Physical torture more familiar as it is the most visible and the most easily recognized as torture. Waterboarding, the favored tactic of American interrogators, is a prime example. It simulates drowning and produces psychological strain, but it is a physical act; the drowning feeling is induced by bringing the victim close to suffocation. Psychological torture, by contrast, is much harder to identify. It does not leave the same obvious marks, but can be just as damaging, if not more so (Bowden 2003). Psychological torture works by disrupting an individuals' control over their environment, humiliation, and the threat of force. These can be used separately or in conjunction to force a prisoner to capitulate. The first can take a range of forms varying from disruption of routine and creating



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temporal and spatial ambiguities to the more extreme means of sleep deprivation, sensory deprivation, and sensory overload. The second, humiliation, is already an established tactic in the war on terror as the pictures and reports from Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay attest. It may not be as visibly threatening as the other mechanisms, but plays an important role in dehumanizing prisoners. The threat of force is perhaps the simplest of the means of psychological torture – it consists in showing a prisoner the tools that will be used, allowing them to hear the screams of others being tortured, or anything else that may generate the fear of being the next one to be interrogated. The subject senses an impending threat, and the anticipation alone causes immense strain even if the threats are never actualized.

Each of these mechanisms is used in the war on terror. The first two are primarily visible in the disruption of life. The normal environment and routine for operating in it are lost as security checkpoints become ubiquitous and regulations constantly change. Perhaps the best example is American color alert system that changes the level of threat for apparently no reason, and often for blatantly partisan reasons. Those who are kept from flying because their name is on a watch list or who are routinely profiled for special screening undergo intense humiliation. So too do the Muslims who are wrongly associated with acts of terror. Most worrisome of all, however, is the extent to which the third mechanism is in effect at all times. There is a constant threat of force. In a society that will approve of any means of gathering information, neither morality nor laws check the arbitrary use of



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power. Anything can be justified as long as it can be connected to the suspicion of terrorist activities. The society proponents of torture help to create is one in which there is psychological torture in this sense. Psychological torture is effective not only against those who are imprisoned but against anyone who opposes government policies. All that is required is a threat of force. Fear and the pain of uncertainty are enough to discourage resistance. The moment of pain is delayed indefinitely, thereby magnifying its power by enshrouding it in secrecy and leaving those who face it to wonder endlessly about when the moment will come and what it will be like.

The traditional means of mass intimidation is punishing a few victims as representatives of a population. Resistance leaders or a random sample of activists are selected and attacked as a threat against other dissidents. While they may not be intentional targets, those falsely accused in the war on terror or labeled terrorists for minor infractions serve as examples. Consider the case of Maher Arar, a Canadian citizen visiting the US, who was mistaken for a suspected terrorist and taken to Syria for “enhanced interrogation” without a trial or even serious investigation (Mayer 2005). The fact that a foreign citizen, with no connection to terrorism, could go from vacationing to being tortured in Middle East shows just how vulnerable people are to false arrest. Precise numbers on the wrongful arrest of terrorist suspects are for obvious reasons difficult to obtain, but the numbers alone suggest that it is a serious problem. Between 2001 and 2005 around 83,000 suspected terrorists were arrested and only 14,500 were kept in custody (Shrader 2005). The number of arrests compared to those held, and

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the small fraction who faced charges, suggests the extent of false arrests. It is doubtful that many of those kept in detention would have been imprisoned by criminal courts, where evidentiary standards require that prosecutors prove guilt. Wrongful arrest is always a concern, but conventional legal channels provide an opportunity for innocence to be demonstrated. Programs like Extraordinary Rendition leave no chance of acquittal. Thus, there is reason for everyone to fear torture, even those with no guilt, simply because innocence is insufficient to guarantee safety. The legitimation of torture is a form of psychological torture for every person that could be wrongly subjected to it. In the ticking bomb scenarios, there is always perfect information about who is the enemy, but no such certainty exists in the real world.

For those who are in no danger of being mistaken for a terrorist, the threat is less direct, but just as real. Along with the Patriot Act, the declining restraint on the use of force, and the strengthening of the executive as part of the war on terror, the torture discourse is an affront to fundamental social values. At the core of the liberal-democratic ideology are the imperatives to protect individuals from arbitrary authority, to avoid excessive use of force, and to respect personal autonomy. The first and second of these are already routinely sacrificed as torture operates outside the laws that are supposed to serve as restraints on governmental power. As David Sussman shows, torture is also an attack on individual autonomy. For it to work there must “be a profoundly asymmetric relation of dependence and vulnerability between the parties.”(Sussman 2005; 6). This vulnerability need not lead to physical



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violence; it must only put one party at a distinct disadvantage. Sussman argues that "torture forces its victim into the position of colluding against himself through his own affects and emotions, so that he experiences himself as simultaneously powerless and yet actively complicit in his own violation."(Sussman 2005; 4). This makes it more akin to rape than killing. A society that allows torture, even if only tacitly as a practice justified in emergencies, is a society with little respect for individual rights. Torture is fundamentally illiberal. As David Luban eloquently puts it, "torture is a microcosm, raised to the highest level of intensity, of the tyrannical political relationships that liberalism hates the most." (Luban 2006; 39).

Intellectuals do not make the most significant contributions to the state of psychological torture. Nevertheless, their participation is particularly egregious for several reasons. First, in an age of widespread cynicism there is still a common belief that scholars are disinterested analysts. Though they may not intervene explicitly on behalf of politicians, they cannot be ignorant of the role that their arguments might play in legitimating actual uses of torture. Interests are supported by theoretical debate, whether or not this effect is intentional. Supporting torture when it is contested as a tactic in an ongoing war is a political decision. Second, the arguments supporting torture purport to do so based on sound moral reasoning. Most rely on consequentialist logic of achieving the best result even if it means committing some injustices, but the arguments are cast in such distorted forms that they are hardly applicable to the real world. This is especially true when the subject is framed as a battle between good and evil or the



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innocent against the guilty. Finally, scholarly debates help to constitute social values and can aggravate or alleviate the psychological strain of traumatic events. When scholars join those who misunderstand torture as being a matter of simple cost/benefit analysis, they contribute to the general ignorance of the effects of torture for the general population.

## Conclusion

There is surprisingly little outrage at the proponents of torture in the war on terror, and it may be objected that this essay overstates the case against them. However, compare the light reaction to the war on terror's fellow travelers with the attacks launched against philosophers who supported other governments' abuses. Nietzsche scholarship was delayed for decades by the mistaken belief that he was a proto-Nazi. Though ample evidence has discredited the view that he was anti-Semitic, the accusation persists. Unlike Nietzsche, Heidegger deserves the criticism. He was a supporter of the Nazi party who never recanted and is widely condemned for declining to do so (Wolin 1990). Paul de Man is another of the many noteworthy examples. After his death, de Man's reputation was tarnished by the revelation that he wrote articles for pro-Nazi newspapers, at least one of which was clearly anti-Semitic. This led to a general reconsideration of his work and its implications (Lehman 1992). These are among the many examples of philosophers' whose real or apparent connection to political events has damaged their reputation. Even such luminaries as Heidegger and de Man can fall victim to the temptations of a popular political current.

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Defending torture is not on par with supporting Nazism, nevertheless, it is hypocritical to submit these and other philosophers to such harsh scrutiny for their political connections while simultaneously insulating those who support the immoral policies of the War on Terror. The defenses of torture may be framed in a more detached manner, but they deal directly with an ongoing political controversy and are themselves integral to it. Of course, these scholars are not alone. Many argue against torture, or at least point out mistakes in the reasoning of its proponents (Scarry 2004; Brecher 2007; Bufacchi 2006; Mayerfeld 2008; Lukes 2005; Scarry 1987; Luban 2006; Sussman 2005). However, it is a mark of the social crises that the war on terror has resulted in so many justifications for prisoner abuse.

Gambetta correctly points out that the “perils that terrorists pose to our lives and civil liberties lie as much in the Western governments’ response as in the damage they can directly cause.” (Gambetta 2004; 36). This should be expanded to include that the danger is in the response of entire societies, not only the governments. The poor reaction is not just a result of political mismanagement. The widespread panic and willingness to sacrifice everything in the name of better security is also to blame. Therefore, it is critical that the best informed members of society take some responsibility in countering the government’s tendency in overstepping its power and responding to terrorism in a way that is illegal, immoral, and likely to produce far more enemies.

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