

Discussions Questions for October 13 – Group 3

*Questions:*

One set of questions about torture concerns the effects of torture on those performing the torture. To help you answer them, I've presented a case study below. You should read it and think about the answer to the following questions: (1) Do you think the psychological effects on those performing torture suggest that torture is immoral? Why? (2) Can those performing torture be considered innocent? And, if so, what do the effects of torture on performers of torture suggest about whether it is morally acceptable for innocents to be harmed?

*Case: (excerpted from "This is how it feels to torture" by Lydia DePillis from The Washington Post, December 11, 2014)*

In the post World War II era, there have been only about 140 analyses or interviews of people accused of being torturers, according to Reed College professor Darius Rejali, whose research focuses on torture through the ages.

The most important thing to know: Torturers are not a few "bad apples," predisposed by nature to cruelty. "Basically they're normal when they go in. They're not sadists," Rejali says. "They're chosen primarily because they're loyal, they're patriotic, and they can keep a secret." Starting with the famous experiments of Stanley Milgram in 1963, which have been replicated since then, most experimental subjects are willing to apply pain to other people under certain conditions.

... Historically, association with torture has two primary effects, Rejali says. First is simple burnout: Interrogation, never mind especially harsh interrogation, is hard and stressful work. That's partly why the Army needed so many interrogators during the most intense phases of the war – 1,200 were trained in 2006 alone.

And second is Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, of the sort often experienced by returning soldiers, but with higher frequency and a particularly nasty edge. ...

In democratic societies, Rejali says – more so than authoritarian regimes under which torturers were driven more by religious or ideological conviction, and thus felt comfortable with their actions – post-conflict trauma is driven by “toxic levels of guilt and shame.” Those symptoms often look similar to ones displayed by victims of torture, to the extent that refugee boards deciding whether someone should be granted asylum found it difficult to distinguish between the two.

... In his 2012 book, “None Of Us Were Like That Before: American Soldiers and Torture,” Joshua Phillips recounted the struggles of soldiers who had abused Iraqi detainees after they returned home. Some self-medicated with alcohol. Three in the unit Phillips followed committed suicide. Daniel Keller, who admitted to techniques like dragging prisoners through concertina wire on the floor, told Phillips he’d have no reintegration problems if he hadn’t taken part in the cruelty.

“If I hadn’t actually hurt anybody, I’d be sitting pretty – I’d be happy as could be,” Keller said. “I wouldn’t have any problems. I wouldn’t be on [expletive] medication. I wouldn’t be sitting here doing an interview because I wouldn’t know anything, and I would be [expletive] living life out there.”

In 2007, The Washington Post profiled Army interrogator Tony Lagouranis, who spoke of being tormented by the things he’d done to prisoners – like giving them hypothermia and staging executions – and feeling permanently disoriented. “It feels like fear. Of what? I’m not sure,” Lagouranis said. “You know what I think it is? You don’t know if you’ll ever regain a sense of self. How could Amy love me? I used to have a strong sense of morals. I was on the side of good. I don’t even understand the sides anymore.”

... Despite those who have gone public with their experiences, much more often, the psychological ramifications of torture are magnified by the fact that they can’t talk about what happened with friends and family, or don’t want to. They’re often reluctant to confide in Veterans Administration psychologists, who could help them get psychiatric treatment, or bring them together with others who’ve had similar experiences. ...

The hardest thing to deal with is the knowledge that although torture is something anyone can fall into – and, in the case of the CIA’s interrogation program, continued over the protestations of those in contact with prisoners – it’s never lionized by postwar society. That’s why, Rejali says, military and intelligence personnel should resist the temptation to use excessive force. “Never say yes to torture,” he says. “Your country will never thank you for it.”