

# The divine in all

*Juliet Morton considers the question: why can we countenance torture?*

A central Quaker tenet is the divinity in all humans, that 'we are all children of God'. This has implications for how we want people to be treated and what we do. Sometimes our belief conflicts with the wider situations we find ourselves in.

Take torture as an example. Despite knowing that torture is hideous and banned under international law, many people think, feeling terrible doing so, that under certain circumstances, in the interests of the safety of other people and oneself, torture is justified. This conflict, between believing in the divine within humans and using torture on someone, poses a dilemma.

It might be useful to ask: what is torture for? What does it claim to achieve? Is it 'successful'? It certainly is a show of power, clearly indicating who is wielding the power in that moment. Torture aims to break 'body and soul' and it does break a person, physically and mentally, often for life; further, this is used to intimidate the community from which the person comes.

In the United Kingdom evidence gained from torture cannot be used: it is not admissible in law. Nevertheless, people believe that using torture on detainees will extract useful information; but does it, and under what conditions? In Iraq, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) thought they could identify patterns from large amounts of data using new analytic techniques. Many Iraqi citizens were 'scooped up', whether they were thought to be implicated in insurrection or not, and interrogated under duress. The CIA found they had too much data to handle and its reliability could not be assessed.

The US special forces in Iraq and Afghanistan believed that rough handling, threatening death and beating their victims during the first minutes and hours after capture, when the victims were acutely disorientated and frightened, enabled them to extract information. They maintained that the information so extracted was useful, but only for the very short-term, not longer.

What is the relationship between memory and acute stress? How memory works is complicated. Short-

term stress both enhances and disrupts memory: it enhances memory formation, but impairs retrieval. When a person remembers a stressful situation they will remember it with a good degree of clarity, but in a stressful situation their recall of information would be poor. Additionally, when under stress our memories are very susceptible to other influences and suggestions. This helps explain why a young Birmingham Muslim, held under duress, became convinced that he had been involved in making a jihadi video, when in fact he had been working in a cycle shop at the time.

'Enhanced interrogation' relates to the issue of memory and long-term stress. It involves extreme stress to a detainee. Over a period of time excess stress has a destructive effect on the brain. This may explain the poor results from the CIA programme in Iraq, where torture was used over many months to gain information from detainees. Some detainees must have known names, facts and locations, but the prolonged pain and terror is likely to have disrupted their ability to recall anything reliably. It seems that many of the victims were often ignorant of the answers being sought and after weeks of beatings or water boarding they might have said anything to make it stop.

Shami Chakrabarti, the director of the campaigning group Liberty, writes that there is 'a fundamental understanding that torture and cruelty do something hideous, not just to the victim, but to the perpetrator and the wider society of which she is a part... to inflict inhuman treatment is... to force a fellow human being to endure a darkness of which we should aspire to rid the world'.

There can only ever be a partial answer to whether torture is justified in the sense of its utility, particularly in its reliability to extract useful information. We are left with the profound question as to whether we individually would be willing to remain comfortably safe when one soul suffers in our name.

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