

guide to the fundamental nature of the universe. But that in itself is a sobering lesson, because we rely upon basic logic all the time to spot inconsistencies and flaws in argument. It is not logic itself which is at fault: the more complex solutions to paradoxes such as these themselves depend on holding the laws of logic firm. The difficulty is rather with applying it.

See also

- 6. Wheel of fortune
- 42. Take the money and run
- 70. An inspector calls
- 94. The Sorites tax

17. The torture option

Hadi's captives looked resolute, but he was sure he could break them, as long as he followed through on his threat. The father, Brad, was the real villain. It was he who had planted the huge bomb that he promised would kill hundreds, perhaps thousands, of innocent civilians. Only he knew where the bomb was, and he wasn't telling.

His son, Wesley, had nothing to do with it. But Hadi's intelligence told him that, though Brad would not break under torture, he almost certainly would if he were to see his son tortured in front of him. Not immediately, but soon enough.

Hadi was torn. He had always opposed torture and would probably have to leave the room while it was carried out. Wesley's innocence was not the only reason for his qualms, but it certainly exacerbated them. But he also knew this was the only way to save hundreds of people from death and mutilation. If he didn't order the torture, would he be condemning people to death, just because of his own squeamishness and lack of moral courage?

For many years scenarios such as this were considered to be purely hypothetical. Civilised societies did not permit torture. All that changed with the 'war on terror', and in particular the scandal surrounding the treatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. The argument was not just about whether the bad treatment

had taken place and, if so, who had authorised it; but about whether it was necessarily wrong.

Hadi's dilemma is a simplified version of a situation it is surely possible for moral, responsible persons to be placed in. Defenders of torture under such circumstances would say that, terrible though it may be, you have little choice but to go ahead. For example, how could you risk another 9-11 by refusing to torture one person, or a few people? Isn't that a kind of moral self-indulgence? You keep yourself pure by not doing the dirty deeds necessary, but at the cost of innocent lives. And if you can see the case for Hadi ordering the torture of Wesley – who is, after all, innocent – then the case for torturing the guilty is even stronger.

The argument is a challenging one for defenders of human rights, who have tended to see all torture as indefensible. To maintain their position, they can adopt one of two strategies. The first is to insist that the torture is in principle wrong. Even if it would save thousands of lives, there are some moral lines that cannot be crossed. There is an arguable case for this position, but the charge of indifference to the lives of those left to die as a result is hard to shake.

The other strategy is to argue that, although in theory torture may sometimes be morally acceptable in rare cases, we need to maintain an absolute prohibition against it in order to hold the moral line. In practice, if torture is sometimes allowed, it will inevitably go on when it should not. It is better that we sometimes fail to torture when it is the best thing to do than occasionally torture when it is wrong to do so.

This argument, however, may not help Hadi. For, though there may be good reasons to adopt a rule that there should be no torture, Hadi is faced with a specific situation where the benefits of torture are clear. The dilemma he has is not whether torture should be permitted, but whether on this occasion he should

break the rules and do what is not permitted, in order to save innocent lives. You may well think that he should not do so, but surely it is clear that his choice is not an easy one.

See also

- 18. Rationality demands
- 50. The good bribe
- 57. Eating Tiddles
- 79. A Clockwork Orange