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Book Review

Terrorism, Ticking Time-Bombs, and Torture: A Philosophical Analysis

By Fritz Allhoff

Reviewed by Krysta Ku

Professor Fritz Allhoff is more than well versed in the ethics of terrorism and torture. He has travelled to numerous universities in the United States and abroad, giving presentations on the moral status of interrogational torture. In addition, in 2009, Allhoff led a graduate seminar entitled “War, Terrorism, and Torture”; his articles on the topic, including his most recent article, “Torture Warrants, Self Defense, and Necessity,” have been published in various law and philosophy journals. Allhoff is currently an Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy at Western Michigan University and a Senior Research Fellow at The Australian National University’s Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics. In the midst of his professional and academic pursuits and accomplishments, Allhoff successfully authored the book, *Terrorism, Ticking Time-Bombs, and Torture: A Philosophical Analysis*.

In his work, Allhoff asks the reader to answer this question honestly: “If interrogational torture is necessary for the abrogation of some terrorist threat, would that torture be justified?” He not only adeptly tackles this question, but he also provides a comprehensive framework for doing so. While this is the direct question his work deals with, Allhoff first equips the reader with a discussion on terrorism and torture before delving into the ticking time-bomb question. Although the reader may be anxious to read arguments for the necessity and justification of interrogational torture, such apprehensions are unjustified. Allhoff impeccably proves that in order for one to understand these arguments, one must understand modern terrorism, torture, and America’s connection to, and status on, both.

In effect, Allhoff’s book began with the 9/11 attacks and the Bush administration’s response to them. He delves into how the 9/11 attacks set a ripple effect into motion, including the triggering of the War on Terror, the passage of the Patriot Act, and the creation of the Department of Homeland Security. This necessary background leads to an argument, which in the current political and cultural climate is particularly intriguing: whether the Bush Administration really failed. While one ponders this question, Allhoff reminds the reader that there hasn’t been an act of terrorism on U.S. soil for over 10 years. While many works jump at the chance to criticize the Bush

Administration and its response to 9/11, Allhoff challenges the reader to take a step back and examine the response and the outcome more closely.

He states that “in some relevant sense, Bush’s strategies worked.” So, the real question was whether the means justified the ends. Or, in other words, were Bush’s strategies necessary or justified, and was the cost to ensure our safety justified? Allhoff shows that these questions are really part of a bigger philosophical question about what we can do to protect ourselves.

Allhoff provides a utilitarian approach on contemporary torture and the ticking time-bomb theory. He explains that “lesser harms are preferable to greater harms, and in exceptional cases torture can be the lesser harm.” To bolster this argument, Allhoff points out that the current torture debate is too fixated on the tortured and not enough on the people who are threatened by terrorist attacks. In contrast, he approaches the torture debate “by placing a premium on the lives of innocents—rather than the putative rights of suspected terrorists.” This viewpoint on torture is significantly transformed when changing focus. Thus, even if torture has a moderate or low chance of saving a significant number of lives, in Allhoff’s view this is a reasonable option we should consider.

In order to fully expand and develop his position on the torture of terrorists during interrogation, Allhoff separated his work into three parts. Part I focuses entirely on terrorism—its definition, the reasons for its evilness, and how the contemporary advent of terrorism has changed traditional norms. Part II heavily discusses torture, its definition, and reasons for why it is intrinsically wrong. In Part III, Allhoff goes beyond the philosophical discourse to discuss real world application of the ticking-time bomb theory.

Not only are his arguments based in logic, but Allhoff’s work is also laid out in a coherent format, where each part of the book builds off of, and expands upon, a previous part. Professor Allhoff’s book has voiced a rare and lacking view on interrogational torture in a vacuum of literature decrying its use. His book also serves a dual function of explaining his position, as well as responding to the positions on torture of other scholars. He leaves politics out of the discussion, and purely focuses on the philosophical and empirical treatments of torture and ticking-time bomb cases. Most importantly, the book is guided by the idea that innocent lives come first, not the lives of those being interrogated.

When reading this book, it is important to understand that Allhoff recognizes that torture is filled with moral harms; he has no argument in that. Allhoff adamantly defines the limits of torture. He asserts that torture is not a panacea, insofar as ticking time-bomb cases are exceptional. He clearly is not advocating widespread, institutionalized torture, nor unwarranted torture. Instead, he asserts that torture must be used when necessary or prudent. He

also points out that torture does not address causes of terrorism, but “is at best a temporary solution to a deeper problem.” Ultimately, he suspects “that torture would ever be justified only in cases reasonably close to ticking-time-bomb cases and that the torture of innocents and preventative torture are not likely to recommend themselves.”

Terrorism also poses serious moral harms—harms that we have the ability to defend against. Although torture may not be the best way of defense in many cases, in Allhoff’s position it cannot be ruled out, and, in exceptional cases, it can be the lesser of two evils. Allhoff qualifies his position, by cautioning that “we must be extremely careful in choosing whether to utilize torture, paying close attention to our epistemic situations and our ability to constrain the use of torture to appropriate cases. These challenges are serious, but not insurmountable.” Readers interested in the current state of interrogational torture—as well as a cogent argument for the use of torture in limited circumstances—would be well advised to read this book.

