Comment:
Ignatieff's Giffords

Forty or fifty years ago the choice, in moral philosophy classrooms, was between deontology and utilitarianism, between Kant and John Stuart Mill: either that the right course of action is what duty dictates or that the right thing is what is of most benefit to the greatest number of people.

In Britain, at any rate, in most people's experience, the 'pay off', the results, the consequences, seem the best guide to the moral value of a course of action. The outcome of our choices is surely what matters. The end, we are likely to believe, justifies the means.

In more reflective moments, particularly when we see the unhappy results of this or that decision, we may remember that some courses of action, whatever the outcomes, are simply right or wrong. 'Duty calls', we might say, in everyday life, perhaps with a sigh or a smile of resignation, when we can see a pretty boring day ahead, doing some worthy thing that will not make us or anybody else very happy. Down the line, we might then reflect, doing the right thing never guarantees a good result. Moreover, we might go on to think, certain courses of action are just right, whatever the consequences, and certain actions are just wrong, like lying or torturing people — intrinsically evil, never to be undertaken or condoned whatever the putatively beneficial effects.

Except that, in newspaper features, in recent weeks, both in the United States and the United Kingdom, the justifiability of torturing has become a topic of discussion: specifically, in connection with captured terrorists who are suspected of having information relating to planned outrages endangering the lives of innocent bystanders. What should we stop at, if there is a fair chance of forcing details out of a suspect that would enable us to prevent the outrage from happening at all?

What is 'the lesser evil'? Michael Ignatieff, the Canadian political philosopher and commentator on current affairs, raised this question in the Gifford Lectures he delivered last month at the University of Edinburgh.

Isn't it 'a lesser evil' to torture a suspect to make him tell than, sticking to the principle that torture is utterly wrong, to risk seeing scores of people killed or maimed by a car bomb about which we have reason to believe that our prisoner very likely has advance knowledge?

Anyway, what counts as torture, Professor Ignatieff asked.

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Stripping a suspect, depriving him of sleep, subjecting him (it is usually him) to the glare of strong light, and suchlike, would be just about this side of respecting his dignity and human rights, so Ignatieff was inclined to think. It would not undermine the sort of standards people like us strive to uphold if we allowed such practices (more or less what the British did in Northern Ireland to IRA prisoners at one stage during the Troubles).

Electrodes attached to our suspect's genitals, dunking his head under water, pulling out his finger nails, and suchlike, seemed, however, Professor Ignatieff thought, to cross the threshold into the unthinkable. We might argue about the first sort of thing (and of course the British eventually had to desist); there could be no argument about the latter. If we did *that* kind of thing to some one, we should not be able to live with ourselves. Whatever the value of the information we expected to extract, we should be brutalizing ourselves as well as the human being in our power. Or rather, since none of us listening to Ignatieff in the glorious surroundings of the Playfair Library, one of the finest rooms in Europe, lined with the busts of the great men of the Scottish Enlightenment, would ever be likely to have to interrogate a suspected terrorist, we should have to leave such dirty work to 'the authorities', to 'Special Branch', or whoever is authorised and qualified to conduct interrogations about which we would prefer not to know in too graphic detail.

According to American newspaper reports, some of the Al Quaida suspects have been turned over to the authorities in Egypt, Jordan and Pakistan, where the techniques of interrogation are expected to be a good deal more 'physical' than the United States authorities are willing to allow any of their own citizens to practise. Perhaps, even, nice young Americans would be too squeamish.

Professor Ignatieff did not have any indisputable conclusions. He only wanted to make us think about what happens to our beliefs about freedom, human rights, the inviolability of the person, and suchlike, when we are tempted to adopt certain practices in the 'war against terrorism'. The fear he sought to articulate was that, in the struggle against the enemies of the Enlightenment, nice folks like us might be colluding with activities that diminish the very values they are supposedly defending.

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