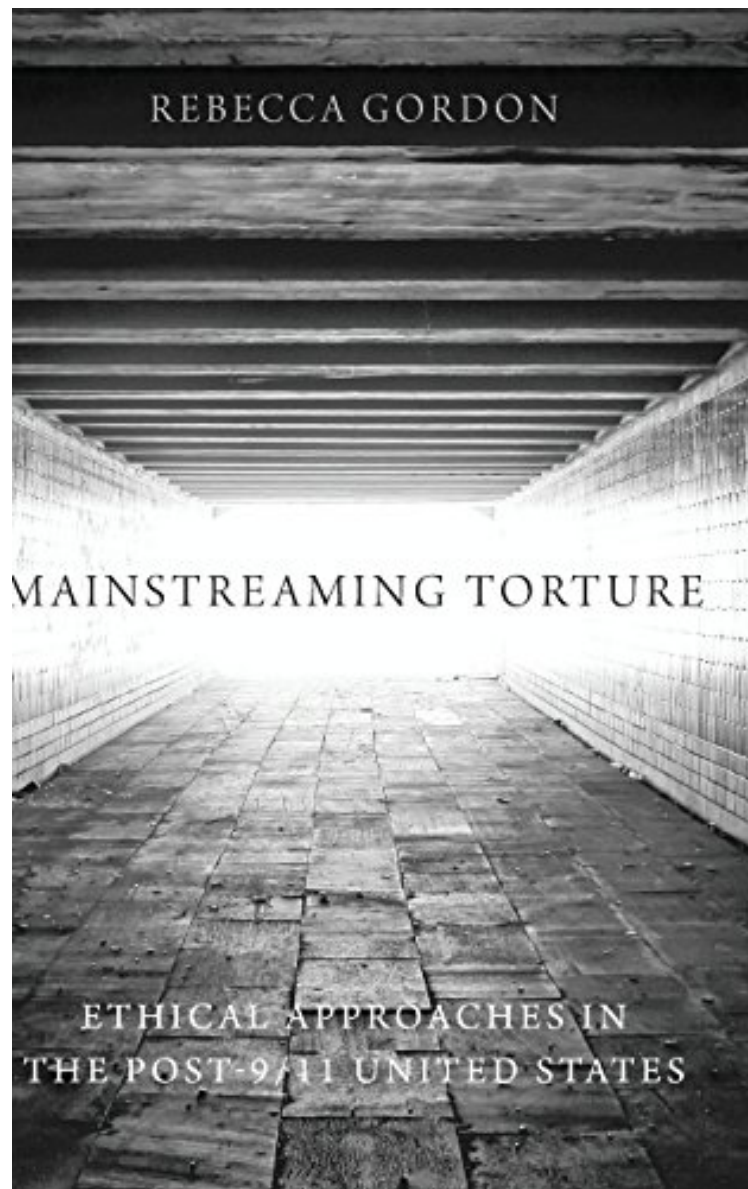


Mainstreaming Torture: Ethical Approaches in the Post-9/11 United States

Rebecca Gordon

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Rebecca Gordon : Mainstreaming Torture: Ethical Approaches in the Post-9/11 United States before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Mainstreaming Torture: Ethical Approaches in the Post-9/11 United States:

8 of 8 people found the following review helpful. Well Worth ReadingBy NansierraThis is a very carefully-argued and thoughtful book about an extremely painful subject. I'm deeply impressed with the author's tenacity and courage in dealing with the topic of torture, certainly not the easiest subject to read about and in the ten years she apparently spent writing and researching it, undoubtedly not an easy topic to live with so intimately. The author does an exceptional job of describing the impact of torture on the victim which goes well beyond its immediate physical horrors and provides an arresting argument that torture is not an isolated incident but a "practice" that has become systematized in US policy. It is, she argues, not successful in achieving its purported aims of uncovering information but, in fact, serves the interest of the power structure. Her insightful answers to the question, "What is torture for?" are well worth reading and contemplating. The ethical stance she takes is grounded in a Western rationalistic perspective, and not one I fully share, but it provides a useful template for discussing the moral issues that torture and our "culpable ignorance" of it raise. She is able to make it abundantly clear that torture is not a loose thread in our political fabric; rather it is a practice that intertwines and tangles what we purport to hold as our deepest national values. I came away convinced her conclusion--that a full accounting and full accountability of the US role in torture--is both necessary and would be profoundly salutary in breaking down the Us and Them mentality that, as the book well describes, distorts our political consciousness. One of the merits of this book is that, though it appeals to an intellectual's palate, it is very clearly-written and accessible and, as such, a good catalyst in promoting this needed public discussion. The personal story at the end is like a grace note that serves to root it in our everyday lives.

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Important and necessary look at tortureBy ewaffleRebecca Gordon combines the fire and urgency of a long time political activist with the intellectual rigor of an academically trained moral philosopher. She shows that that torture done by and in the name of sovereign governments isnt just aberrant actions by out of control members of the military or deranged intelligence officers but is an ongoing practice carried out over long periods of time. It is institutionalized state cruelty and degradation with its own traditions, histories and rules. The subtitle of *Mainstreaming Torture* shows Gordons method of attack. The question of torture as state policy seemed settled we were the good guys and we didnt do it. Torture was not only immoral but was also a felony and a treaty violation. Absolute prohibition of torture was one the key elements that set the United States apart from regimes that practiced it. We didnt have death squads, we didnt use poison gas against our citizens, we didnt litter the streets with the bodies of those who suffered extra-judicial execution. Disappear wasnt a transitive verb in American English unlike the authorities in Argentina during the Dirty War, Guatemala during the 30 year civil war or in Pinochets Chile, our police didnt disappear people. We didnt torture. This changed on 9/11/2001 according to the scoundrels who approved of torture, authorized it in the bureaucracy, justified it in the press and carried it out. Dick Cheney said "I have no problem as long as we achieve our objective. His use of our as a modifier includes, as far as he is concerned, the American people and not just the band of evildoers responsible. Three former directors of the CIA wrote in the Wall Street Journal that enhanced interrogation which includes waterboarding the subject, confining him in a coffin sized box, as well as chaining him to the ceiling for days and locking him naked in a freezing cell, led to the capture of important Al Qaeda commanders, disrupted terrorist plots and saved thousands of lives. The three were the most senior members of the chain of command that led to torture. They made their claims without providing evidence, trusting that the confidence the American people had in intelligence agencies would be sufficient. Defenders of torture try to defend their objectively evil actions by referring to a ticking time bomb theory. It goes like this: there is a nuclear bomb hidden somewhere in New York City and the terrorist responsible for setting it has been captured. Only he knows the code to stop it from exploding. Would you torture him and save the lives of thousands if not millions? The ticking bomb scenario is a powerful hypothetical and one that the unindicted war criminals who authorize torture hope you accept. But it is only hypothetical. In, in real life you dont get such clean scenarios you dont get Jack Bauer saving the world on 24. In real life you get equivocation and confusion, lack of clarity and the fog of war. You get incomplete information that conflicts with what you think you already know about the nature, magnitude, and timing of threats, and about the identity of those responsible. You get what has always been the result to questioning under torture: lies, half-truths, anything that the victim feels will make his tormentors stop. And, as Gordon points out, you dont have a lone wolf but heroic government agent doing the dirty work. There must be a sophisticated infrastructure of evil including trained practitioners, doctors and psychologists willing to help inflict pain, isolated places where torture is carried out, like Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib and the prisons of compliant foreign governments plus lackeys and lickspittles prepared to justify it. Once we start justifying immoral actions based on their hoped for outcomes, there is no principled place to stop. *Mainstreaming Torture* is an important and necessary book that deserves a wide audience.

7 of 8 people found the following review helpful. Torture - what our federal government does in our nameBy CustomerExtremely well-researched and plainly written, "Mainstreaming Torture" is an expose of what our government continues to do. Even under the Obama administration torture is routinely administered and, more often than not, just for the sake of torture. Most detainees in our prisons at Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib and elsewhere are people who were at the wrong place at the wrong time. They are innocent yet they have been tortured for (false) "intel". It's a very sobering read. Our upper echelon "leaders" -- especially those in the George W. Bush administration -- need to be held accountable for these crimes!

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 reopened what many people in America had long assumed was a settled ethical question: Is torture ever morally permissible? Within days, some began to suggest that, in these new circumstances, the new answer was "yes." Rebecca Gordon argues that September 11 did not, as some have said, "change everything," and that institutionalized state torture remains as wrong today as it was on the day before those terrible attacks. Furthermore, U.S. practices during the "war on terror" are rooted in a history that began long before September 11, a history that includes both support for torture regimes abroad and the use of torture in American jails and prisons. Gordon argues that the most common ethical approaches to torture—utilitarianism and deontology (ethics based on adherence to duty)—do not provide sufficient theoretical purchase on the problem. Both approaches treat torture as a series of isolated actions that arise in moments of extremity, rather than as an ongoing, historically and socially embedded practice. She advocates instead a virtue ethics approach, based in part on the work of Alasdair MacIntyre. Such an approach better illumines torture's ethical dimensions, taking into account the implications of torture for human virtue and flourishing. An examination of torture's effect on the four cardinal virtues—courage, temperance, justice, and prudence (or practical reason)—suggests specific ways in which each of these are deformed in a society that countenances torture. *Mainstreaming Torture* concludes with the observation that if the United States is to come to terms with its involvement in institutionalized state torture, there must be a full and official accounting of what has been done, and those responsible at the highest levels must be held accountable.

"Required reading."--*Christian Century* "A useful survey of recent philosophical, legal, and popular debate about torture.... *Mainstreaming Torture*...does valuable work in describing the realities of how torture has been practiced by the United States in recent years and the way it has deformed our political culture."--*Ethics* "This remarkable morally and politically challenging and courageous work confronts unblinkingly the profoundly disturbing truth that both popular and scholarly discourses in America consistently distort and sanitize the essential nature of the torture that has become a socially embedded practice in our country. If you care about our national character, consider these insightful and telling analyses and demand an appropriate accounting from our political leaders."---Henry Shue, Senior Research Fellow, Centre for International Studies, University of Oxford "We would rather avoid facing the reality of torture. In this book, Gordon shows us that our primary ways of thinking about torture are in fact ways of avoiding the full reality of it. Arguments for and against torture treat it as isolated acts by individuals, but Gordon shows that torture is embedded in a system of social practices with a set of moral habits which are in many ways fostered by society as a whole. This is a well-researched, well-argued, and disturbing book." --William T. Cavanaugh, Professor of Theology, DePaul University "Torture by our U.S. military and spies is not new. Nor is it the result of a few bad apples. Gordon documents the systematic teaching and use of torture by the U.S. since Vietnam. This excellent book challenges us to end torture. Not only by prosecuting the front line people who get caught, but also going after the high-ranking public officials who are torture's intellectual authors." --Bill Quigley, Professor of Law, Loyola University New Orleans

About the Author Rebecca Gordon received her B.A. from Reed College and her M.Div. and Ph.D. in Ethics and Social Theory from Graduate Theological Union. She teaches in the Department of Philosophy and for the Leo T. McCarthy Center for Public Service and the Common Good at the University of San Francisco. Previous publications include *Letters From Nicaragua* (1986) and *Cruel and Usual: How Welfare "Reform" Punishes Poor People* (2001).