

Moral Psychology: The Ethics of State-Sanctioned Torture

The concept of the acceptability of torture represents a profound ethical and psychological conflict, sitting at the intersection of human rig

Authored by
mohammed looti

June 14, 2026

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammed looti (2026). *Moral Psychology: The Ethics of State-Sanctioned Torture* The concept of the acceptability of torture represents a profound ethical and psychological conflict, sitting at the intersection of human rig. Psychepedia. Retrieved from <https://psychepedia.arabpsychology.com/?p=18326>

Introduction: Defining the Acceptability of Torture

The concept of the **acceptability of torture** represents a profound ethical and psychological conflict, sitting at the intersection of human rights, national security, and moral philosophy. Torture, defined broadly as the intentional infliction of severe physical or psychological pain by state agents for purposes such as coercion, punishment, or intelligence gathering, is universally prohibited under international law. However, the question of its acceptability persists not merely in the realm of theoretical debate but within political discourse and public opinion, particularly during periods of heightened perceived security threat. Examining this acceptability requires analyzing the psychological mechanisms individuals employ to rationalize cruelty, the utilitarian arguments that frame torture as a necessary evil, and the societal factors that shift moral boundaries. The very existence of this debate challenges the notion of absolute human dignity and reveals deep divisions regarding the non-derogable nature of human rights, forcing an uncomfortable confrontation with institutionalized violence.

The psychological research into the acceptability of torture delves into the cognitive processes that allow individuals, and subsequently societies, to override fundamental moral programming against inflicting pain. This phenomenon is rarely rooted in inherent sadism but rather in complex processes of **moral disengagement**, where ethical standards are suspended under specific, often institutionally sanctioned, conditions. These conditions usually involve framing the act as instrumental--a means to a greater good, such as saving lives--or redefining the victim as an enemy who has forfeited their right to humane treatment. Consequently, acceptability is not a static measure; it fluctuates wildly based on the perceived immediacy of threat, the political climate, and the degree to which state authorities legitimize the use of extreme measures, indicating a fluid boundary between ethical condemnation and pragmatic necessity.

Furthermore, the legal framework provides a crucial baseline against which acceptability is measured. The United Nations Convention Against Torture (CAT) and other key international instruments explicitly state that no exceptional circumstances whatsoever--whether a state of war, threat of war, internal political instability, or any other public emergency--may be invoked as a justification for torture. This absolute prohibition is intended to remove the possibility of situational ethics from the equation. Despite this clear legal stance, arguments for conditional acceptability often rely on hypothetical extremes, most famously the **ticking time bomb scenario (TTBS)**, which posits a situation where torture is the only means to prevent an imminent catastrophe. The willingness of a population to endorse such exceptions highlights a fundamental tension between adherence to universal moral principles and the consequentialist drive to minimize harm to the collective.

Historical and Legal Frameworks of Absolute Prohibition

Historically, torture has been utilized by various states and empires as a standard instrument of judicial procedure, punishment, and political control. Its modern legal rejection is a relatively recent development, cementing itself primarily after the horrors of World War II, leading directly to the establishment of foundational international human rights instruments. The absolute prohibition against torture is a cornerstone of contemporary international law, recognized as a principle of **jus cogens**, meaning it is a peremptory norm from which no derogation is permitted. This prohibition is codified extensively in instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and most specifically, the CAT. These documents mandate that states must take effective measures to prevent torture in any territory under their jurisdiction and prosecute those who commit or are complicit in such acts, regardless of rank or position.

The non-derogable nature of the prohibition is perhaps the most significant legal hurdle for arguments of conditional acceptability. Unlike some human rights which may be limited during a state of emergency, the right not to be tortured is sacrosanct. This legal philosophy is based on the recognition that torture is fundamentally destructive to the victim's personhood and dignity, and that allowing even limited exceptions inevitably creates a **slippery slope** toward normalization and abuse. Proponents of absolute prohibition argue that once a state permits torture under any circumstances, it erodes the rule of law and grants officials unchecked power, leading rapidly to the expansion of sanctioned cruelty far beyond the narrow, theoretical circumstances initially proposed for its use. The legal system thus operates on the premise that the state must model ethical conduct, even when faced with extreme security challenges.

However, the legal framework often faces challenges stemming from definitional ambiguity and political expediency. While the CAT defines torture clearly, states sometimes resort to euphemisms--such as "enhanced interrogation techniques" or "coercive questioning"--to describe actions that clearly meet the legal criteria for torture but are politically sanitized to increase public acceptance and reduce legal liability. This linguistic maneuvering serves as a crucial psychological tool, allowing political actors and the public alike to support practices that they would otherwise condemn if described using the legally mandated term. The battle over the acceptability of torture is therefore often fought in the domain of semantics, where the perceived necessity of the action is pitted against the clear, non-negotiable standards of international humanitarian law.

Psychological Mechanisms of Justification

Understanding the acceptability of torture requires a deep dive into social and moral psychology, particularly the processes that facilitate **moral disengagement**. When individuals are placed in situations that demand actions contrary to their internal moral codes (e.g., inflicting severe pain),

they must employ cognitive strategies to minimize the perceived dissonance. Albert Bandura's framework identifies several key mechanisms, including moral justification (framing the harmful act as serving a higher moral purpose, such as national defense), euphemistic labeling (using sterile language like "waterboarding" instead of "simulated drowning"), and advantageous comparison (contrasting the act of torture with a much worse hypothetical outcome, like a terrorist attack). These mechanisms effectively neutralize the self-condemnation that would normally arise from violating ethical norms.

Central to the justification of torture is **dehumanization**. By stripping the victim of their human identity--labeling them as a "terrorist," "enemy combatant," or "subhuman"--perpetrators and supporting publics can distance themselves emotionally from the suffering inflicted. Dehumanization makes it psychologically easier to accept extreme measures because the victim is no longer perceived as a member of the moral community entitled to human rights. This process is often amplified by political rhetoric and media representation, which consistently portray certain groups as inherently dangerous and lacking in moral worth, thereby pre-emptively lowering the threshold of acceptability for violent actions directed against them. The more abstract and distant the perceived threat, the easier it is for the public to accept extreme measures against the anonymous "other."

Furthermore, the powerful influence of authority and institutional structure plays a critical role in fostering acceptability. The findings from experiments like the Milgram study demonstrate that individuals are far more likely to engage in morally questionable acts if they perceive the action as legitimate and sanctioned by a recognized authority figure or institution. In the context of state-sanctioned torture, the institutional structure provides **diffusion of responsibility**. Responsibility for the painful act is fragmented and dispersed across the chain of command--from the lawyer who drafts the justifying memo, to the politician who authorizes the policy, to the interrogator who executes the technique. This diffusion allows individuals at every level to minimize their personal moral culpability, thereby increasing the collective acceptability of the practice within the state apparatus.

The Utilitarian Argument: The Ticking Time Bomb Scenario

The most powerful theoretical argument used to promote the acceptability of torture rests on **utilitarianism**, the ethical framework that judges the morality of an action based solely on its outcome, specifically aiming for the greatest good for the greatest number. This argument finds its crystallized form in the Ticking Time Bomb Scenario (TTBS). The TTBS hypothesizes that authorities have captured an individual who knows the location of an imminent bomb capable of killing thousands, and the only way to extract this time-sensitive information is through immediate, severe interrogation (torture). In this highly contrived scenario, proponents argue that the moral duty to save thousands of innocent lives outweighs the moral prohibition against harming one guilty

individual, thus making the torture acceptable, or even obligatory, from a purely consequentialist standpoint.

However, critics of the TTBS point out that its persuasive power lies entirely in its unrealistic perfection. It assumes absolute certainty regarding several variables: 1) the captive possesses the necessary information; 2) the information is reliable and actionable; 3) the torture will guarantee the information's release in time; and 4) no other non-coercive method would suffice. In real-world counter-terrorism operations, these certainties never exist. Information gained through torture is notoriously unreliable due to the victim's willingness to say anything to stop the pain, often leading to false leads and wasted time. Therefore, the TTBS serves less as a practical policy guide and more as a moral lever designed to manipulate public opinion by focusing on the catastrophic outcome rather than the inherent wrongness of the act itself.

The acceptance of the TTBS framework also ignores the critical long-term consequences of institutionalizing torture. Even if the TTBS were to theoretically succeed once, the state has now codified the principle that human rights are conditional and expendable when deemed necessary by the state. This precedent inevitably leads to the expansion of torture beyond the extreme TTBS case to less urgent, more routine intelligence gathering, as officials seek to replicate past perceived successes. Furthermore, the use of torture severely compromises the state's moral authority, alienates potential allies, fuels extremism through perceived injustice, and violates the fundamental principle that the state must never descend to the moral level of the adversaries it seeks to defeat.

Deontological and Rights-Based Objections

In direct opposition to the utilitarian justification stands the **deontological** ethical framework, which asserts that certain actions are inherently right or wrong, regardless of their consequences. From this perspective, torture is fundamentally unacceptable because it violates the absolute moral duty to respect human dignity. Immanuel Kant's philosophy, central to deontology, holds that individuals must always be treated as ends in themselves, never merely as means to an end. Torture, by its very nature, uses the victim's body and mind solely as a means to extract information or achieve a political goal, thereby committing a non-negotiable moral violation.

The rights-based approach reinforces this objection by defining the right not to be tortured as a **non-derogable human right**. This means the right cannot be suspended, limited, or taken away, even if doing so could theoretically save lives. The strength of human rights law lies in providing protection precisely when circumstances--such as war or existential threat--would otherwise tempt the state to abandon its ethical responsibilities. Accepting torture, even in the most extreme hypothetical cases, implies that fundamental rights are conditional upon political circumstance, rendering the entire concept of universal human rights meaningless in times of crisis.

Furthermore, deontological critics emphasize the corrosive effect of torture on the perpetrators and the institutions they represent. The practice demands that agents of the state deliberately inflict profound suffering, a process that is psychologically damaging to the individual and morally corrupting to the government. The acceptability of torture thus entails a societal cost that transcends the immediate outcome: it signifies a state's abandonment of its commitment to justice and fairness, replacing it with brutality. The state's foundational duty is to uphold justice, and using torture fundamentally undermines the moral legitimacy of any subsequent legal or political action it undertakes.

Societal and Political Drivers of Acceptance

Public acceptance of torture is heavily influenced by societal dynamics, particularly high levels of perceived threat and the manipulation of fear by political leaders. When populations feel insecure, whether due to actual terrorist attacks or sustained media coverage emphasizing vulnerability, the psychological need for security often overrides ethical constraints. In this climate, leaders who advocate for "tough measures," including torture, are often rewarded politically because they appear decisive and committed to protecting the ingroup. Studies consistently show that acceptance rates spike following major security incidents, demonstrating a direct correlation between fear arousal and moral compromise.

The role of media and popular culture cannot be overstated in shaping acceptability. Television shows, movies, and literature frequently employ the TTBS or similar dramatic scenarios, portraying torture as a quick, effective, and morally justified tool used by heroic protagonists to save the day. This frequent exposure normalizes the practice, creating a cultural script where torture is viewed as a regrettable but often necessary part of effective counter-terrorism work. This narrative often omits the reality of torture--its ineffectiveness, its brutality, and its tendency to be applied to low-value targets rather than the high-value individuals imagined in fiction--thereby contributing to a sanitized public perception.

Finally, political polarization and **authoritarian personality traits** are strong predictors of acceptance. Individuals who score high on measures of authoritarianism--characterized by a rigid adherence to social conventions, a submission to established authorities, and hostility toward outgroups--are significantly more likely to endorse the use of torture. Political rhetoric that frames conflicts in stark, Manichean terms (good vs. evil) reinforces these tendencies, fostering an environment where ethical considerations are dismissed as weakness and where the punishment of perceived enemies is prioritized over adherence to human rights standards.

The Systemic Costs: Erosion of Democratic Values

While the immediate justification for torture centers on intelligence gathering, the long-term,

systemic costs to the state and democracy are often far more devastating than any perceived short-term gain. The institutional acceptance of torture severely undermines the **rule of law**. If the government is permitted to act outside the law against certain individuals, it demonstrates that fundamental legal protections are discretionary, not absolute. This creates a dangerous precedent that can be turned against domestic dissenters or marginalized populations in the future, establishing a system of arbitrary power rather than constitutional governance.

The practice of torture also critically impairs intelligence effectiveness. The premise that torture yields reliable, timely information is widely refuted by experienced interrogators and intelligence analysts. Torture primarily produces compliance, not truth; victims often provide misinformation or fabricated confessions simply to end the suffering, leading intelligence agencies down costly and dangerous rabbit holes. Furthermore, the discovery that a state engages in torture severely damages its international standing and cooperation. It makes securing the cooperation of foreign intelligence agencies and local populations more difficult, undercuts diplomatic efforts, and serves as a powerful recruitment tool for extremist groups who cite the state's cruelty as justification for their own violence.

Ultimately, the acceptance of torture represents a profound failure of democratic principle. A democratic society is defined by its commitment to justice, transparency, and the protection of individual rights, even for those accused of the most heinous crimes. When a democracy chooses to employ the methods of its adversaries, it sacrifices the moral high ground and compromises the very values it seeks to defend. The true cost of acceptability is the erosion of public trust in government and the normalization of state violence, leading to a less just, less secure, and less free society.