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Challenging Utilitarianism

The Depiction of Torture in LOST

Torture is a recurring motif in LOST and is introduced very early on in the series: Episode 8 (“Confidence Man”) of the first season contains the first scene of physical torture. This is the scene I will base this essay on because as the first instance of torture it serves as a cornerstone for the handling of any such scenes following it. Secondly, the “formula” and means of legitimization used in this scene are almost identical to later portrayals of torture. As I will outline in this essay, torture in LOST is largely based on utilitarian thoughts, specifically the Greatest Happiness Principle with emphasis on a particular limitation of this principle made by John Stuart Mill. Furthermore, it is my belief that torture as portrayed in the series reflects certain practices used by the Bush administration in the War on Terror and their repercussions on a global scale. To support this interpretation, I will compare the sociological situation presented in LOST to the state of real life, post-9/11.

The pilot episode of LOST was aired on September 22, 2004, on the US network ABC. Incidentally, this is the very day the events of this first episode are set. Immaterial as this may seem, this is of more than minor importance to this essay: It is safe to assume that each of the characters in the series have, in their fictional biographies, experienced of 9/11 and its aftermath. It seems reasonable to assume that most of them would have at least heard of Extraordinary Rendition and Guantanamo Bay. They may even have seen the pictures from Abu Ghuraib which were released in May of that year. Their frame of mind in terms of torture therefore mirrors that of a majority of US citizens (and Westerners in general) at that time.

LOST begins with a plane crash on what appears to be an island in the Pacific. The situation that culminates in the first act of physical torture is as follows: Sawyer, self-proclaimed outlaw and former “confidence man”, is suspected of having stolen

an asthma inhaler. There are good reasons for this assumption: In the aftermath of the plane crash, Sawyer started looting and hoarding what was left after the crash for his personal gain, trading the more valuable things with fellow plane crash victims. More importantly for this argument, he never denies possessing the inhaler—he even starts to bargain for it when asked if it is indeed in his possession. He is subsequently imprisoned by Jack Shephard (whose name, homophonous to “shepherd,” is not incidental) and Sayid Jarrah. Jack has taken on the role of the survivors’ leader while Sayid is an Iraqi emigrant with a thick Arabian accent and a past as a soldier in the Iraqi Revolutionary Guard that he is trying to distance himself from. What is more, in the aftermath of Desert Storm, a US general made him torture his own former superior officer. Throughout the course of the series then, Sayid is shown as continually trying to distance himself from his history.

As it turns out, there is no rest for the wicked on the island and Sayid has to continue torturing and killing despite his best intentions. Because of his history and “talents”, he is the one chosen to interrogate Sawyer about the inhaler. The situation is getting more dangerous by the minute as one of the survivors, Shannon, has acute asthma. She has just slipped into a serious fit which is threatening to kill her, and her trusted inhaler is nowhere to be seen.

To a certain degree, this constellation reflects the US practice of Extraordinary Rendition—a suspect who may be a threat to a certain group or members thereof and whose guilt is anything but proven is tortured by a foreigner so that “evidence” unearthed during the course of this “interrogation” can be used. Cynically speaking, this is a very clean process which basically mirrors the Desert Storm incident mentioned above: Jack, the American, can stand aside and claim innocence while Sayid, a foreign outcast who is repeatedly suspected of being a terrorist due to his appearance and accent, has to get his hands dirty. Should he produce results, it will be much to Jack’s advantage. Should he fail, it will only be to his own disadvantage, further alienating him from the other survivors. The same trope occurs on the international level as well: Terror suspects are sent to foreign countries to be tortured, allowing the US government to claim that its agents do not torture prisoners. Said foreign countries, on the other hand, are known for their interrogation tactics and have less-than-clean records with regard to human rights. As opposed to the US, these countries do not claim to be guarding human rights and the ethical treatment of prisoners in the first place. That was the situation in early 2004 anyway,

when the first season of LOST was being filmed, and before the fact that US agencies themselves employed practices like waterboarding and sleep deprivation came to light.

The scene and its portrayal of torture at first sight appear to be largely based on the Greatest Happiness Principle as defined by John Stuart Mill as well as on the balance of Pleasure and Pain. As far as Happiness is concerned, the sociological situation is as follows: Sawyer, through his own actions, has alienated himself from the group. He is an outcast who acts in a very anti-social manner. In this particular scene it seems as if he puts his personal gain above a fellow survivor's health and life. Shannon is a member of the group, albeit not a very productive or important one. She fulfills the high school cheerleader cliché, a girl who is more interested in getting a tan on the beach than in helping to construct a shelter. Nevertheless, she does not actively act against the group. She may not be of great help but she has strong ties to the group. Her half-brother Boone is a valuable member of it; furthermore, he protects her and actively works to bring her into the group as a productive contributor.

Applying the principle of Greatest Happiness (Mill 1968: 10f.), the situation is very clear: To the group, the Pain caused by Shannon's physical pain and possible agonizing death would arguably be greater than the pain inflicted on Sawyer through torture. As Mills puts it, "utility includes not only the pursuit of happiness, but the prevention or mitigation of unhappiness" (ibid.: 11). Therefore, the unspoken argument behind the whole torture incident is that, cynical as it may seem, Sawyer's suffering would cause less unhappiness than Shannon's death by asphyxiation. He has actively dissociated himself from the group through his actions and as a self-imposed outcast, his fate (and injuries) will leave most members of the group emotionally untouched.

To the group, it essentially appears as if he tried to bargain for his personal profit using Shannon's life. Torture, then, is something he brought onto himself by his own anti-social actions. He apparently does not value human life anywhere near as much as he seems to value his material profits. According to Mill, this act of torture for the sake of saving a fellow survivor's life appears to be the right and moral thing to do. The whole purpose of this act is, in fact, to cause as little unhappiness as possible in this particular situation. In Mills' terms, Jack and Sayid act so they can pursue "the prevention or mitigation of unhappiness" (ibid.: 11) to as

large a degree as appears possible to them, or, as Jeremy Bentham puts it: “Let disappointment as far as possible be prevented” (Bentham 1829: 296). As achieving Happiness is not an option, this is the next best thing to do.

The second cornerstone of the legitimization for LOST’s use of torture is the balance of Pleasure and Pain. This is by no means limited to Sawyer’s or Shannon’s different physical pains; it also concerns Sayid’s emotional health. As mentioned above, Sayid had set out to find closure with regard to his violent past. The fact that he was a torturer under an inhuman dictator is obviously troubling to him. Having to torture again, against his very best intentions, supports the utilitarian interpretation of the scene in various ways. According to Mill:

[Doing without happiness] has often been done by the hero or the martyr, for the sake of something which he prizes more than his individual happiness. [...] Though it is only in a very imperfect state of the world’s arrangements that any one can best serve the happiness of others by the absolute sacrifice of his own, [...] I fully acknowledge that the readiness to make such a sacrifice is the highest virtue which can be found in man. (Mill: 15)

Bentham holds a similar view on the subject:

[...] this is that of the sort of action denominated ‘virtuous’ the exercise required more or less of self-denial; that is to say, of a sacrifice made of the present good, whether pleasure or exemption from pain, to some greater good to come. (Bentham: 305)

Mill does however make a very important remark: “A sacrifice which does not increase, or tend to increase, the sum of total happiness, [the utilitarian morality] considers as wasted” (Mill: 15f.). This is of utmost importance in the scene at hand because, as it later turns out, Sawyer never possessed the inhalator to begin with. Jack and a fellow survivor find it three fictional years, five seasons and exactly 100 episodes later in front of the caves Shannon’s group had taken shelter in. In other words, his torture did not increase the sum of total happiness, nor did it even “tend to increase” it. According to Mill, this would only have been the case had there been absolute certainty that he was beyond any doubt in possession of the item. This would have made its recovery through torture a justifiable means of increasing the sum of total happiness as it would have ensured Shannon’s survival and, as such, the happiness of the group.

What happens instead is the exact opposite: Following the torture, there is an increase in Pain, not Pleasure. Sawyer is in physical pain; Jack has sustained a considerable loss in his reputation as a fair and skilled leader, causing more Pain for the group now that they have lost faith in the one person the majority of them trusted; Shannon is still suffocating and last but not least (and in the context of Mill’s

limitation, most importantly), Sayid is in emotional pain: Having tortured again, despite his intentions never to do so, Sayid leaves the group to reflect on what he has done and what kind of person that makes him. Instead of the hero and martyr, he has become the absolute self-imposed outcast. His sacrifice, namely giving up his intentions and salvation for the supposed best interest of the group, can only be considered wasted. Little will it console him that in the eyes of Bentham, his actions were true self-denial and therefore truly virtuous (Bentham: 305f.).

Again, this particular aspect of torture in LOST ties in all too well with a number of very real situations: When stories of secret prisons and torture at Guantanamo and Abu Ghuraib broke, the US suffered a loss in international standing it is still recovering from even today. In this way then, Jack Shephard can be interpreted as the doppelganger of the Bush administration in the LOST microcosm (at least as far as torture is concerned). Similar to Jack's actions in the series, the Bush administration's take on torture caused a schism in the Western world. On the one hand, there were those who zealously defended what was being done to prisoners for the sake of the "mitigation of unhappiness." On the other hand, there were critics who challenged this view by pointing out the unhappiness and Pain this had caused on a global scale. While it could be argued that some interrogations indeed prevented terrorist plots from happening and thus secured Pleasure, one needs to take into account that the blatant breach of human rights has possibly caused more Pain. Additionally, it gave rise to further Islamist terrorism by seemingly offering proof of just how evil the Imperialist USA really was and is. Again, what started out as a means of preventing further unhappiness can only be considered a wasted effort if we take Mill's stance into account. Unlike Sayid, Dick Cheney and the rest of the administration are not even likely to be considered virtuous by Bentham as their actions failed to show any true self-denial (ibid.: 306).

The depiction of torture in LOST is all the more important when we take a second contemporary show into account: While a popular show like 24 takes a decidedly right-wing, Republican stance on the issue of torture, LOST challenges this "positive" and heavily idealized view on the issue. In 24, there is never any serious doubt whether torture is necessary or not. Yes, it may be an unpleasant thing to do, but the ends almost always justify the means by which they are achieved. And who would argue with a defused A-bomb in an American metropolis? LOST, on the other hand, goes further than that and provides a much broader (and less idealized)

view of the subject. The scene discussed in this essay starts out much like a textbook example of the Ticking Time Bomb Scenario. The nature of it changes, however, because torturing Sawyer does not make the island a better place. Quite on the contrary, it causes a schism among the survivors and makes the island a much darker place where Pain seems to thrive while Pleasure has a hard time keeping up. One must also keep in mind that all this happened despite what appeared to be absolute certainty about his guilt. Interestingly enough, the pattern stays much the same throughout the series: When in season 2 the survivors take hostage the leader of a mysterious and sinister group known as “the Others” in retaliation for a string of abductions, torturing this person only brings about more confusion. While the man does speak in the midst of torture, his “confessions” prove to be useless decoys, which do not help bring back the abducted. Instead, they deepen the rift among the survivors.

LOST, therefore, shows the failings of utilitarianism as a philosophical foundation upon which to base torture. As the scene in “Confidence Man” shows, even in the face of apparently obvious guilt, beating someone up and shoving bamboo underneath his fingernails will not necessarily bring about the desired results. Unlike in other shows, torture in LOST is not streamlined for an optimal torture / results ratio. Instead, LOST challenges the one-sided interpretation of utilitarianism as a legitimization of torture by taking into account Mill’s limitation: There is nothing virtuous or noble in torture because it generally fails to promote Pleasure and many times contributes to the spread of Pain. By that definition, torture can only be considered a wasted effort.

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