

The Ethics of Torture

NOTE: This blog post contains mild spoilers for the 2013 Hugh Jackman movie "Prisoners."

An intriguing movie on many levels, "Prisoners" sets up a very thought-provoking scenario in which the father of a kidnapped girl has extremely strong evidence that a particular suspect is guilty of or at least involved in the kidnapping. The evidence consists of something the suspect says directly to him when no one else can hear. Although the police perform a cursory investigation based on what the father reports the suspect said, they find no obvious proof and soon move on to other leads.

Becoming more desperate as the days tick by, the father eventually kidnaps the original kidnapping suspect and proceeds to torture him in an attempt to extract the information necessary to rescue his kidnapped daughter. I'll leave out any additional spoilers as I found the movie interesting enough to recommend.

What struck me was that the debate over torture usually centers on whether or not a suspect is actually guilty (that's often what the torture is designed to determine.) In this case, the father had a very compelling reason why he felt certain of the suspect's guilt. While most libertarians unreservedly condemn torture, most would also agree that deadly force is certainly permissible to prevent a kidnapping.

Assuming that the guilt of a kidnapper is not a question in your own mind, would you support the use of torture in an attempt to obtain information from the kidnapper that might well save the victim's life? If not, why would you oppose torturing someone who you would support killing if necessary to prevent the same crime? Does someone who is actively causing harm to an innocent (as is the case when a kidnapping victim is still kidnapped) have any rights that must be respected or are all of their natural rights forfeit until such time as they cease causing harm?

— Parrish