

Philosophy Ripped From The Headlines!



Issue #15, 2 (December 2018)
Compiled & Edited by *Philosophy Without Borders*

Philosophy Ripped From The Headlines! is delivered online in (occasionally discontinuous) weekly installments, month by month.

Its aim is to inspire critical, reflective, synoptic thinking and discussion about contemporary issues--in short, *public philosophizing* in the broadest possible, everyday sense.

Every installment contains (1) excerpts from one or more articles, or one or more complete articles, that recently appeared in online public media, (2) some follow-up thoughts for further reflection or discussion, and (3) a link or links for supplementary reading.

1. “ There’s a Lot of Killing in Thou-Shalt-Not-Kill States”

By Margaret Renkl

The New York Times, 10 DECEMBER 2018

Full article available at URL = <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/10/opinion/death-row-bible-belt.html>



A roadside billboard in Alabama/Annie Flanagan for The New York Times

NASHVILLE — Until August, Tennessee had not put a prisoner to death in nearly a decade. Last Thursday, it performed its third execution in four months.

This was not a surprising turn of events. In each case, recourse to the courts had been exhausted. In each case Gov. Bill Haslam, a Republican, declined to intervene, though there were many reasons to justify intervening. Billy Ray Irick [suffered from psychotic breaks](#) that raised profound doubts about his ability to distinguish right from wrong. Edmund Zagorski's behavior in prison was so exemplary that even [the warden pleaded for his life](#). David Earl Miller also [suffered from mental illness](#) and was a survivor of child abuse so horrific that he tried to kill himself when he was 6 years old.

Questions about the humanity of Tennessee's lethal-injection protocol were so pervasive following the execution of Mr. Irick that both Mr. Zagorski and Mr. Miller elected to die in Tennessee's electric chair, which was built in 1916. (The state spruced it up in 1989.) Their choice says something very clear about Tennessee's three-drug execution cocktail, as Justice Sonya Sotomayor noted in a dissenting opinion to the Supreme Court's decision not to hear Mr. Miller's case: "Both so chose even though electrocution can be a dreadful way to die," she wrote. "They did so against the backdrop of credible scientific evidence that lethal injection as currently practiced in Tennessee may well be even worse." Electrocution might not be any more humane than death by lethal injection, in other words, but at least it offers a *speedier* hideous death.

Presumably this is the same thinking behind the position taken by 51 death-row prisoners in Alabama who want to die in an untested nitrogen gas chamber rather than by either the electric chair or lethal injection.

nitrogen gas. That's where we are in the whole ungodly machinery of capital punishment: Human beings are choosing to die by nitrogen gas.

Here in red-state America, the death penalty is supported by 73 percent of white evangelical Christians and by even a solid majority of Catholics — 53 percent, despite official church teaching to the contrary — according to a [Pew Research Center survey](#) released in June.

The three men Tennessee most recently executed were all convicted of especially brutal murders — in Mr. Irick's case the rape and murder of a little girl left in his care; in Mr. Miller's the murder of his girlfriend, a young woman with cognitive disabilities. Mr. Zagorski murdered two men who were meeting him to buy a hundred pounds of marijuana with cash. Death-row inmates are not sympathetic figures.

Not that being a sympathetic figure gets you very far here in Execution Alley in any case. In 1998, Texas executed a woman who became a born-again Christian while in prison. In 2015, Georgia executed a woman who had earned a *theology degree* on death row.

It's hard not to notice that all these inmates, sympathetic or not, were killed in the Bible Belt, in states where a sizable portion of the population believes they live — or at least believes they *should* live — in a Christian nation. Mr. Miller was the second inmate in the South to be executed last week, and two more — one in Texas and one in Florida — will die at state hands

by Thursday. That's a lot of killing for the thou-shalt-not-kill states and at a time of year that's particularly ironic. What is Advent, after all, but a time of waiting for the birth of a baby who will grow up to be executed himself?

For many anti-abortion Christians, there's no contradiction between taking a "pro-life" position against allowing a woman to choose whether to continue a pregnancy and taking a "tough on crime" position whose centerpiece is capital punishment. An unborn fetus, they argue, is innocent while a prisoner on death row is by definition guilty.

But for a true "pro-life" Christian, guilt or innocence really shouldn't be the point. Cute and cuddly or brutish and unrepentant, human life is human life. It doesn't matter whether you *like* the human life involved. If you truly believe that human life is sacred, right down to an invisible diploid cell, then you have no business letting the state put people to death in your name, even if those people have committed hideous crimes.

There are numerous pragmatic reasons to abolish the death penalty. It doesn't deter crime. It doesn't save the state money. It risks ending an innocent life. (The Death Penalty Information Center lists the names of 164 innocent people who have been exonerated after serving years on death row. The most recent, Clemente Javier Aguirre, was released from a Florida prison just last month.) It is applied in a haphazard and irrational manner that disproportionately targets people of color. It puts prison staff in the untenable position of executing a human being they know personally and often truly care for.

But the real problem with the death penalty can't be summed up by setting pros and cons on different sides of a balance to see which carries more weight. The real problem of the death penalty is its human face.

A person on death row is a *person*. No matter how ungrieved he may be once he is gone, he is still a human being. And it is not our right to take his life any more than it was his right to take another's.

2. Some Follow-Up Thoughts For Further Reflection and Discussion:

Is the following argument sound? If so, why? If not, why not?

1. Every human person innately possesses *dignity*—that is, absolute, nondenumerably infinite moral value, beyond all economics or merely instrumental value.
2. Human dignity is an *endowment*, not an *achievement*, and therefore its value cannot either be increased by doing good things, no matter how good, or diminished by doing bad things, no matter how bad.
3. US Bible-belt Christians claim to recognize the dignity of all human persons, by virtue of their strong anti-abortion stance, yet also strongly

support capital punishment, which is rationally and morally inconsistent on the face of it.

4. It is also deeply ironic, especially at Christmastime, since Christ was wrongly executed by wicked Pontius Pilate.
5. Moreover, the killing-methods currently used in capital punishment in most US Bible-belt states are so hideous and inhumane that deathrow prisoners are opting for untested methods that seem faster and less painful.
6. There are various instrumental arguments against capital punishment; but the only truly compelling argument against capital punishment is *the dignitarian case*, which says that since even deathrow prisoners are human persons with dignity, and since intentionally arbitrarily killing any person (as opposed to accidental or unintentional killing, or killing in self-defense as a last resort, or consensual assisted suicide, aka voluntary euthanasia, for example) is a violation of respect for the dignity of deathrow prisoners, then capital punishment is rationally unjustified and immoral, and should be abolished everywhere.

3. One Link For Supplementary Reading:

[America Has Stopped Being a Civilized Nation](#)

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- WHY WE SHOULD SUBVERT AND DISMANTLE SOCIAL MEDIA

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue15-1 dec18](#)

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- **BORDERS AND IMMIGRATION, CRIME AND PUNISHMENT, & CULTURAL CONFLICT**

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