In *The Ethics of Torture* Wisnewski and Emerick aim to convince us that torture, once we understand what it is and how it operates, can never be morally justified. They do this by presenting four different interdisciplinary models for understanding torture – economic, phenomenological, dramaturgical, and communicative – and arguing that torture cannot be justified under any of these models. This is an original and thought-provoking approach. Drawing on material from other disciplines (such as psychology, sociology, and critical theory) can extend the reader’s understanding of the nature of torture beyond what can sometimes be a narrow philosophical perspective. Yet while I am sympathetic to the aims of this book, which contains well-argued criticisms of some of the central arguments in favor of torture, overall the interdisciplinary analysis results in a somewhat inconsistent approach to the topic that, at times, can alienate rather than inform the reader.

The book begins with a useful discussion of the problems of defining torture, noting (correctly) that a single definition will be unable to capture all the aspects of torture. In Chapter 2 (one of the strongest chapters in the book) Wisnewski and Emerick introduce the economic model of torture – the model most commonly used by those seeking to justify the use of torture in exceptional circumstances such as the infamous ticking bomb scenario, which typically makes use of a basic cost-benefit analysis to lead us to the seemingly unavoidable conclusion that torture should be permitted. The authors claim that the ticking bomb argument is fallacious because it relies on a “semantic contradiction” – i.e. the concept of torture used in the ticking bomb scenario is so far removed from everything we know about real torture that “what is being called ‘torture’ strains credulity” (p. 24). Torture in the ticking bomb scenario is always presented as potentially effective in a very short time frame – yet all the evidence from the real interrogations shows that a crucial aspect of the effectiveness of torture is the fact that it can continue indefinitely. If a victim knows that the torture will cease within a few hours, that fact alone is likely to render torture ineffective. Furthermore, the most effective methods of torture as determined by, for instance, CIA research in interrogation (for example, sleep deprivation and sensory manipulation) require time to achieve the desired results. Thus the idea that torture could be effective in a short time frame flies against all we know about torture, and so the ticking bomb scenario requires us to imagine a version of torture that is impossible (hence the semantic contradiction). I am not entirely convinced that torture in the ticking bomb scenario involves a necessary contradiction, but Wisnewski and Emerick’s analysis of the vast difference between torture as it is presented in the ticking bomb scenario and real world torture is convincing, as is their rebuttal of the specific defenses of torture offered by Alan Dershowitz and Mirko Bagaric and Julie Clark. Furthermore, Wisnewski and Emerick convincingly argue that if we remove the time constraint from the ticking bomb scenario, the intuitive force of the scenario is lost, and the argument ceases to be effective – it cannot justify torture even on “its own terms” (p. 54).
In Chapter 3 the authors turn to the phenomenology of torture – the effects of torture on the victim – and argue that the attack on the victim’s dignity is the central “wrong-making” feature of torture. As they correctly note, many philosophical justifications of torture fail to appreciate what torture actually does to the person who is tortured. Typically, the pain of torture is represented as of short duration, causing no lasting harm. Yet, as Wisnewski and Emerick demonstrate, once we consider the actual experiences of torture victims, it rapidly becomes apparent that this is a gross misrepresentation of the real effects of torture. Using research on and the accounts of torture victims, Wisnewski and Emerick reveal how torture destroys (sometimes permanently) victims’ abilities to live meaningful and emotionally rich lives. Thus, to claim (as several philosophers have done) that death is always worse than torture is to seriously misunderstand what torture does. The correct comparison, Wisnewski and Emerick note, is not death and torture, but death and “torture plus death” (p. 63), since torture is in effect a kind of living death. It is in this aspect of torture that the moral wrongness of torture lies – the destruction of the victim’s ability to live a meaningful life – the corruption of the fundamental cornerstones of human dignity. Torture, for Wisneski and Emerick, is the most profound violation of basic human dignity and a perversion of the structure of basic human relationships of respect.

This analysis of torture has much to recommend it, particularly the careful analysis of the impact of torture. However, while I agree with Wisnewski and Emerick that respect for persons is probably a “moral primitive” (p. 70), in the sense that it is a moral notion that can’t be inferred from more basic moral concepts, it is unclear from their analysis what respect for persons amounts to. Does it require a positive appraisal of persons? Or does it involve respect as recognition of moral status? A more careful analysis of respect would be useful, since without such an analysis it is unclear what respect requires of us in terms of our treatment of others and ourselves.

Chapters 4 and 5, which deal with the dramaturgical and communicative models of torture, are less successful. Chapter 4 draws heavily on the work of Ervin Goffman – relying extensively on quotes to explain the dramaturgical perspective, in which the self is conceived of as a “consequence of human interaction” (p. 82) rather than the product of a pre-existing autonomous will. The explanation of this theory was hampered by the reliance on long quotes, and it was not obvious from the account given in the chapter that this theory allows us to “get a clearer grasp of the ethical elements of modern torture” (p. 79). The main argument appears to be that we can understand torture as involving the adoption of roles. In the case of the torturer, this can require potentially dangerous role-identification and role distance, and in the case of the victim, torture destroys the victim’s ability to fashion his or her own self and control his or her self-presentation. This is arguably correct, yet the idea that extreme role-identification can enable the performance of torture (and harm the torturer) has been noted by several writers on institutional violence, notably Stanley Milgram (see *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (London: Tavistock, 1974), pp. 135-152). So it is unclear what the more controversial commitments of dramaturgical theory add to this analysis. We don’t need to adopt the dramaturgical view of the self as composed primarily through the adoption of