



**2023-2024 Graduate Ethics Essay Prize  
3<sup>rd</sup> Place**

**Questioning the Morality of the Realm of Iron Bars  
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## Questioning the Morality of the Realm of Iron Bars

For the essay, I aim to integrate both religious and scientific perspectives. This would help provide a comprehensive and balanced understanding of moral, philosophical, and empirical viewpoints of ideas. As I navigate through each topic, I will try my best to consider how religious beliefs and scientific findings intersect and diverge, and how they contribute to the broader conversation about morality and justice. The arguments as well as the conclusion will come late, towards the end of the essay.

### Prologue

*“The country of Liberty and Freedom has the most people behind bars.”*

1.9 million people are confined nationwide. Highest of any country. <sup>1</sup>

The Incarceration rate has declined to 531 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown. Before that, in 2018, the per capita rate per 100,000 individuals was 642. Which translates to roughly, 1 person among every 155. Dunbar estimated that individuals can maintain about 150 stable relationships. This means it was highly likely that at least 1 person that you or I knew in the USA would have been incarcerated in 2018s. <sup>2 3</sup>

In the most recent study of recidivism, 77 percent of state prisoners who were released in 2005 had been arrested again by 2010. Recidivism is highest immediately after release: 43 percent of released prisoners are rearrested during the first year. <sup>4</sup>

*“So God created man in his image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”*

– Bible, Genesis 1:27

*“We created man in the best design”*

– Quran, 95:4

The human mind undoubtedly stands as one of the most intricate and complex phenomena known to us. It is the pinnacle of complexity— it boasts approximately 86 billion neurons, accompanied by 85 billion other cells, with over 100 trillion connections. Extensive efforts and several multi-million-dollar research endeavors have fallen short of fully mapping the brain's intricate structure. The complexity of the brain is not limited to its physical makeup; its functions are an even greater enigma. And among these fascinating functions, consciousness reigns as the greatest mystery, defying comprehensive explanation despite centuries of philosophies and debate.<sup>5</sup>

Then why does our society sometimes exhibit ugliness? What accounts for the presence of evil, malice, immoral actions, and similar phenomena? Isn't humanity expected to embody perfection?

Introduction to human imperfection

*“There are two kinds of beings in this world—those endowed with a divine nature and those possessing a demoniac nature. I have described the divine qualities in detail, O Arjun. Now hear from me about the demoniac nature. Those possessing a demoniac nature do not comprehend which actions are proper and which are improper. Hence, they possess neither purity, nor good conduct, nor even truthfulness.”*

– **Bhagavad Gita 16:6-7**

The questions we're posing delve deeply into philosophical, psychological, and sociological realms. Perspectives on human nature and society vary widely among different philosophical traditions and belief systems, but here, I'll offer some insights from a small range.

- Many philosophical and religious traditions acknowledge the inherent imperfection of human beings. For example, in Christian theology, the concept of original sin suggests that humans are born with a sinful nature inherited from Adam and Eve.

- From a psychological perspective, scholars like Sigmund Freud emphasized the existence of unconscious drives and desires that can lead individuals to engage in behaviors considered immoral or harmful.

*“Men are more moral than they think and far more immoral than they can imagine.”*

— **Sigmund Freud**

- Sociological perspectives highlight the role of social structures, institutions, and cultural norms in shaping human behavior. Factors such as poverty, inequality, discrimination, and societal pressure can contribute to the prevalence of "badness" or negative actions.

- Environmental factors, including upbringing, education, and exposure to violence or trauma, can also influence individuals' moral development and behavior. It implies that individuals themselves are accountable for their actions, but external factors such as upbringing, social environment, and psychological predispositions can influence decision-making.

- The concept of free will suggests that humans have the capacity to make choices and act according to their minds. However, the extent to which individuals have genuine freedom of choice is debated among philosophers and scientists.

*“For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.”*

– Bible, Matthew 15:19

God punishes the sinful in His way, but humans have some of their systems in place to deal with convicts and criminals. Let us explore some.

## Exploring the Pillars of Modern Incarceration

Of the people coming out or going into jail, If they were found guilty, sometimes they were punished with physical pain, such as being whipped (Corporal Punishment). Sometimes they were forced to work without pay or for meager wages. Others might be sent far away from their communities and not allowed to come back (Banishment). The most serious punishment was execution, and many people were killed for their crimes (Capital Punishment). Prisons changed that.

Over time, most countries decided that these types of punishment were cruel or ineffective, so they started using jails and prisons as places where people could be punished by losing their freedom for a specific amount of time. Judges could give some people longer sentences if their crimes were more serious, and shorter sentences if their crimes did not deserve a long punishment.<sup>6</sup>

Prisons introduced prolonged confinement as a form of punishment. Like how we tend to keep spoiled fruits and vegetables away from fresh ones because they might spoil as well. By a similar argument, old legislators tried to keep those who have broken the law and done harm to society away from the general population and keep them locked away: they were incarcerated. During this time, they cannot leave and they have to follow the rules of the facility.

The idea of Modern Prison started before the American Revolution but took off after. Its inception can be attributed to two main reasons:

1. The Jail Reform Movement: Due to the growing dissatisfaction with the current jail facilities that we had. They were usually increasingly overcrowded. Notoriously filthy. They were corrupt. Jails were run by jailers who had full control over the jail who were not paid by the state, rather the fee and fines of people incarcerated there. They would have to buy food, water, and alcohol from the jailer and he would

essentially have a monopoly. They were also places of disease and oftentimes they would cause an outbreak in the surrounding communities. This was essentially before the American Revolution

2. The move against Corporal and Capital Punishment: These were public especially painful forms of physical punishment. This included whipping, branding, or spending time in pillories or stocks that hold while town members could see you and interact in all sorts of ways. There were concerns that these were not working to deter people. They were not scaring people away from committing crimes.

Moreover, these as well as capital punishments were not seen as befitting a humane society. And especially after the American Revolution, they wanted to be considered a humanitarian society and a republic where everyone's rights are upheld.

As these two movements merged, paved the way for prison reform. Which was in two major waves. The first one started right after the American Revolution in 1785 which then ended around the 1820s because the first wave of prisons failed and had to be replaced, according to the people of that time. So we get the second wave of prisons which look a lot like what we see today. That wave lasted from about the late 1810s to about the Civil War in the early 1860s.<sup>7</sup>

Prison advocates argued that people would hear scary stories about prisons, and the thought of being locked away from friends and families would terrify them into never committing a crime. People expected that some prisoners would learn a lesson from their prison experience. If they were scared of going back to prison, hopefully, they would be less likely to break the law in the future. Some prisons tried to "rehabilitate" people by giving them an education, job training, or therapy that might help them prepare to return home. But how often were these true?

## Man Within Walls Behind Bars

Let us look at the state of our prison system now. Ever since prisons were popularized in the 1820s, we have been having the same conversion– for almost 200 years.

One of the most prominent arguments against the prison system comes from Jim Rohn’s quote:

*“You are the average of the five people you spend the most time with.”*

As people inside these prisons are close to all other kinds of convicts and criminals, the rehabilitative efforts tend to get even worse.

The profiles and motives of radicalized persons vary considerably, but the first steps towards radicalization are generally a result of sympathies for radical discourse and of meeting an individual, in person or online, who is already radicalized. Prisons are one of the places for such contacts. Radicalized prisoners take advantage of the concentrated population in prisons to proselytize and develop extremist and terrorist networks.<sup>9</sup>

Sources inside the prison officers’ union say Whitemoor has become a center of radicalization and many Muslim inmates have left as “fully signed-up members of al-Qaeda.”

One inmate on remand was persuaded by an Al Qaeda prisoner to undertake a mission within 72 hours of arriving at the jail, according to a 2012 report by the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee. The unnamed individual was housed three cells away from the radical Jamaican-born preacher Abdullah al-Faisal who convinced him to become a suicide bomber within three days. The inmate reportedly left prison and went straight to Yemen to join an Al Qaeda training camp. But a Yemeni imam managed to send him to a religious school. The alarming jail population figures were obtained from the Government by Labour’s shadow minister Kahn.<sup>10</sup>

During the Iraq War, a notorious prison called Camp Bucca played a significant role in the formation of the Islamic State (ISIS). Located near the Kuwait-Iraq border, Camp Bucca was a sprawling detention center where the U.S. military held detainees during the Iraq War. It housed some of the most radical jihadists captured during the conflict. The prison had a reputation for being tough and was known for its harsh conditions.

Nine members of the Islamic State's top command, including the infamous Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, spent time at Camp Bucca. Other key figures like Abu Muslim al-Turkmani, senior military leader Haji Bakr, and foreign fighter leader Abu Qasim were also incarcerated there. While some of these individuals may have been extremists before their detention, their time at Bucca deepened their radicalism and provided opportunities to expand their following. The prison environment acted as a virtual terrorist university, with hardened radicals as professors and other detainees as students.

Abu Ahmed, who later became a prominent ISIS member, first met Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi at Camp Bucca. The prison facilitated networking among extremists, allowing them to share ideologies and strategies. When these detainees left Bucca, they were even more committed to their extremist cause. The release of hundreds of inmates from Camp Bucca caused anxiety among local officials. Many of these freed prisoners would eventually resume fighting. Unfortunately, the Iraqi government and authorities underestimated the scale of the problem. Camp Bucca inadvertently contributed to the rise of ISIS, planting seeds for the very forces it aimed to suppress.<sup>11 12</sup>

What is most unfortunate is that even now, young children are left with hardened criminals. The very governments that invested billions in countering terrorism seem to overlook the potential resurgence of like-minded individuals.



## Escape from the Sanctuary of Sorrows

The U.S. spends \$81 billion a year on mass incarceration, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, and that figure might be an underestimate. In 2017, the Prison Policy Initiative estimated the actual cost to state and federal governments and impacted families is roughly \$182 billion. Those dollars go to staffing the criminal justice system and meeting the basic needs of the more than 2 million Americans who are incarcerated.

But when those people leave prison or jail and reintegrate into their communities, the question of where support comes from gets complicated. Government funding for parole and other reentry services is minimal in comparison to the amount spent to incarcerate people, and organizations struggle to apply and reapply for the funds. Reentry organizations, most of which are nonprofits, run on small budgets.<sup>13</sup>

Roughly half of the prison population falls within the age bracket of 26 to 40:1 period in life where many individuals establish stable relationships, build families, and pursue their dreams. Incarceration during these years deprives individuals of the opportunity to live these experiences, leaving them at a great social loss upon reintegration into society.

Even the best-designed prisons can be rendered meaningless in our conversation about rehabilitation if people released from these prisons face challenges in the outside world. Such as, not receiving any governmental assistance or getting jobs— even those which they trained for in the prisons. The difficulty in getting almost any sort of job due to background checks, discrimination against people with criminal records, not being able to secure a place to stay or transition to the outside world, and finally a myriad of fees and fines to pay make it especially difficult to keep them from re-entering the world of crime.

If we want to prevent crime and we're talking about punishment, we're also having the wrong conversation. Much of the motive of prisons was based on deterrence, but if that was the case, we would have more concrete evidence that it works. Instead, we have weak

and mixed proof of this. The best way we stand a chance at preventing a crime is by intervening before it happens.

The only conversation that could help solve the problems we face is one about social policies and the things that work to prevent crime. By funding Reentry nonprofits we can facilitate ease of shifting into the new environment. Moreover, Things like education, universal basic income, childcare, shoring up health care, and early childhood nutrition — all these things that have nothing to do with a crime directly, but benefit everyone in society, in the long run, help fight crime.

Life after incarceration is often a profound struggle, extending far beyond the prison walls. For the more than 20 million people with a felony record, their reentry into society becomes a complex journey.

Incarceration doesn't end at the prison gate. It extends into what sociologist Reuben Jonathan Miller calls the “afterlife” of mass incarceration. This afterlife is marked by lingering effects—the way jails, prisons, and the system of mass incarceration continue to shape lives even after sentences are served. Families of the incarcerated are also affected, facing challenges related to stigma, limited opportunities, and disrupted relationships. Inside prison, individuals have minimal control over their daily lives—when they wake up, what they eat, and their routines. This lack of autonomy can lead to feelings of dependence and helplessness. The psychological impact of imprisonment is significant, affecting mental well-being and resilience.

Miller argues that mass incarceration is fundamentally a problem of citizenship and political membership. We've created an alternate track for those accused of crimes, denying them full participation in society.<sup>14</sup>

Something that changes the lens is adopting a system closer to what the Netherlands follows. In the Netherlands, the approach to incarceration is distinct, emphasizing rehabilitation and community-based care. In the Netherlands, prisoners are typically not kept in traditional cells as you might find in other countries. Instead, the focus is on rehabilitation and community-based care.

Let's shift our focus away from prison systems and instead delve back again to explore the intricacies of human behavior.

#### Case Study: From the Iron cage to the Encounter Hall

*This is a personal anecdote of an evening with a friend (who has asked me to retain his anonymity) who was tried and tested by the Indian criminal system.*

When you are convicted on grounds of terrorism, no country would spare you or not treat you as a threat. India was no exception. "Seeing death from so close, makes me think that every breath I take now is an extra". It started with an arrest in a nominal police custody. He was arrested on suspicion when tensions were high and a communal riot breakout looked not very far. A simple note was found on him with his tailor's phone number who allegedly was a part of a terrorist organization active in that part of the country. Though he pleaded that he knew nothing about his tailor Tariq's terrorist links, his pleas were replied with sticks and batons. Every time he tried to prove his innocence; he was met with more anger from the police officers in whose remand he was locked up. Being in the minority of the country's population, he couldn't find anyone in his cell with whom he could relate. All of the officers tried one after the other with leather belts and cricket bats to get anything of value from him. But on the receiving end, was a man whose only hope was the judiciary.

He waited and persevered through the pain every day trying to not go unconscious. After a few days, when tensions cooled down a little, he was presented in front of the magistrate for his hearing. The Indian judicial system requires the police to present any person whom they have arrested to be present within the first 24 hours of the arrest. But for him, it took 7 days of excruciating pain and regular beatings from the officers in charge who were in hopes that they would crack a lead. “I started to doubt if humans had an iota of humanity left in them”. The pain and effects from those beatings still manifest themselves in the form of tremors in the hands and anxiety attacks. How could a man who was treated as if he didn’t have a right to live and who was stripped of his dignity, his pride and his honor believe in humanity again?

A court date was decided and he was presented that day in front of the judge. In the meantime, tailor Tariq had left the city which raised more suspicion and made things worse for the defendant. The honorable high court decided that further investigation was required and the defendant shall be kept in judicial custody (which was far better than police custody as he could at least breathe peacefully without having to constantly be worried about a mid-day interrogation session). After a couple of hearings in front of the judge, he was dismissed and declared innocent.

Not all was lost for our “convict” as this nightmarishly horrifying episode only took away a month or so of his life. However, he now had an outlook on life that was impossible to achieve without a couple of officers unleashing their inner monsters on him to get a fake confession. He now didn’t trust anybody. His “goodness” was lost somewhere between the cries and wails of that holding cell. Ethics and morality were mere words that only existed in the dictionaries for him.

For every job he applied for, he was faced with rejection and was called a criminal. His popularity grew among the neighbors and people were surprised by how a simple guy like him would ever do such crimes. Lies originated from the police car patrolling his locality and propagated by people whom he once called his friends.

“It was 3 in the morning when they smashed the front door of my house and took me from my sleep to the police station”. Being the only brother to 5 sisters and a helping hand for his old parents, his future flashed before his eyes from the window of the van. He had his suspicion that they would come for him again and if he were to go with them again, he wouldn’t be coming back for a long time. He still chose to stand his ground and remain in his city despite his father’s suggestion of moving to another country. He thought that if he did the right thing, he would not be put through this torment again. Even though his spirit was broken, he did what was “ethically right” for him. But he wasn’t even given 15 days of freedom and found himself in the lap of the same people who he prayed to not even see again.

Amidst the short-lived freedom that our convict was enjoying, Tariq Tailor was caught. During an interrogation, Tariq heard the name of our convict and pinned it on him to save some of his colleagues. And thus, our convict was picked up in the middle of the night. He was then handed to the special task force made for the sole purpose of finding the culprit behind the bombings that shook the city a day before his (2nd) arrest. The task force was a combination of people from all the major departments of police who were considered the “beasts” of the force.

The year followed by the arrest was a year of pain and suffering for our convict. He was tossed from cell to cell and from department to department who all were trying to get confessions and names which he didn’t even know about. He had to endure cold winters in cells of marble flooring with no clothes and cold water being poured every hour. He was

humiliated and stripped of his identity to the extent that he started doubting his innocence. He could easily take a name; any name and put their life in the same position as he was in, and be free to go home and start a new life. Maybe in a different country this time. But he didn't. He chose to suffer but not lie. His nails were pulled out and cigarettes were extinguished on his flesh. He was hung upside down and beaten till he lost consciousness. He was given electric shocks on his private parts. All of this happened without the knowledge of the concerned authorities. He suffered and continued to suffer but also continued to do what was right.

A year had passed after he was “seemingly” kidnapped from his house, his relatives and parents lost hope that he'd ever return. The task force tried their best but were hitting a dead end every time they interrogated him. They tried every trick in the book for a fake confession (they had their reasons). They tried to lure him with a reduced sentence. They threw at him everything they had. When they saw that he wouldn't fold under any circumstances, they had to pack it up. They couldn't just allow him to talk freely again. Their torturous ways would have been busted. They brought him to the encounter hall along with 3 others who were in the same plight as him. “We had a blindfold on. The only thing I could hear was a gun firing; followed by a cry”. When his turn came, the man leading the task force grabbed him by the collar and took him away in a cell to vent out the leftover rage he had. The others gave names and crumbled under pressure and met the sad fate. But he didn't budge. Maybe that hurt their ego and to satisfy it by causing more pain, they let him live.

His case file got reopened under the pretext that he was on the run from the police and surrendered himself a year later. Despite his best tries and countless efforts from the lawyers, he was sentenced to 10 years under a reduced sentence for his surrender. With hair a little grayer than he remembers and eyes a little weaker, he stepped out of the prison building in the same clothes, 10 years later as a free man. His ethics and “morally right” actions landed

him here. How would a man standing on grounds that no man ever deserves to, as a result of his ethical code, ever attribute any meaning to “morals”? He has seen it all. Life after death. Death in the afterlife. He has seen people forget themselves as “people”. A man who lives every day as a surplus, every step as though he is stepping out of a grave, every breath as a blessing. How could he ever trust humanity?

### Redefining the Human

*It is undeniable that the human being is afflicted by many imperfections and flaws, both in his nature and in the environment he lives and grows in. Nevertheless, despite these shortcomings and difficulties, what distinguishes man as the “greatest creation”, “of the best design” or “most advanced entity”, is his remarkable capacity to redeem himself from his errors and sins, to transform himself for the better, to adapt himself to different situations and challenges, and to recover from the adverse effects of his actions.*

*“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him”*

– The Bible, John 3:16-17

*“Say, ‘O Prophet, that Allah says,’ ‘O My servants who have exceeded the limits against their souls! Do not lose hope in Allah’s mercy, for Allah certainly forgives all sins. He is indeed the All-Forgiving, Most Merciful.”*

– Al Quran, 39:53

At the heart of this distinction lies an openness to change and a commitment to self-improvement. Humanity demonstrates its ability to navigate the complexities of life and emerge stronger from challenges. Amidst the landscape of existence, it is this resilience and capacity for growth that truly define humanity's greatness.

Humans ARE capable of change.

*"We are not solely defined by our mistakes; rather, they serve as opportunities for growth and self-discovery."*

- Source: Brené Brown, "Rising Strong"

## Conclusion

From the above analysis and discussion, we are at a point where I can formulate clearly my arguments for the essay and follow into a conclusion.

We have seen the reason for creating prisons as a form of punishment by confinement was not in the interest of pretty much anyone. It was merely a shabby work to keep people away and for deterrence— without much evidence of its success.

If imprisonment leads to rehabilitation and societal benefit, it aligns with utilitarian principles. However, if incarceration perpetuates suffering without positive outcomes, it becomes morally problematic. Sending convicts to the current system of prisons does more harm than good.

All humans have the capacity for redemption. Sometimes, they may lose their way due to circumstances, environment or influences. Rehabilitation can play a crucial role in guiding individuals back toward a positive path. It involves understanding the root causes of their actions, addressing those issues, and providing support to help them make better choices.

It is imperative that the concept of Egalitarianism extends to all individuals of society, even former criminals and convicts. And thus, the escape of

*"Your past actions do not dictate your future identity; they merely reflect a part of your journey."*

- Carl Rogers, "On Becoming a Person"



There needs to be great reform in the prison system as we know it now. The rehabilitation programs must not only focus on psychological therapy but also include practical systems of re-introducing convicts back in the world. Prisons and criminal corrective centers put inmates in ethical dilemmas that leave no choice for them but go back to their old lives . All prisoners must be given a chance to attempt to live their lives. Empathy, compassion, and a commitment to understanding can contribute significantly to the rehabilitation process. Let us strive to create a world where everyone has the opportunity to learn, grow, and transform for the better.

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