



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

**Questioning the Morality of the Realm of Iron Bars  
Adeeb Abdul Taher  
Masters in Computer Science**



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.

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

*here 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*

– **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.

### **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.

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.

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

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.

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

## 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

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. \_

-up members of al-

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 shadow minister Kahn. \_

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.

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</sup>



## 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: a 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 myrimyrif0088inally a

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,

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.

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

olice custody.

He was arrested on suspicion when tensions were high and a communal riot breakout looked





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 coun



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"





## References

11. "Camp Bucca: The US prison that became the birthplace of ISIS" - [The Independent](<https://www.independent.co.uk>)

12. "The inside story of ISIS" - [The Guardian](<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/11/-sp-isis-the-inside-story>)

released" - [PBS NewsHour](<https://www.pbs.org>)

14. "Why Life After Incarceration Is Just Another Prison: Big Brains Podcast" - [University of Chicago News](<https://news.uchicago.edu>)