

How Our Society Treats Prisoners 'Like Animals'

About 2.2 million people reside in the approximately 5,000 prisons sprinkled across the U.S. today, [more than any country in the world](#).

They've been put there for being found guilty of violating any number of laws that society has deemed important enough to send people away. But what is the ultimate purpose of the prison system?

We use the term "corrections" today for a reason. The idea that people are not simply being punished for a crime but reformed so they can contribute to society after paying their debt is deeply entrenched in our understanding of the purpose of prison.

Though people today might disagree [on the extent](#) to which prisons should emphasize rehabilitation over punishment, most would agree that both punishment and rehabilitation are necessary and proper elements.

Hegel, however, took a different view. The German philosopher suggested that efforts to reform (or deter) people were barbaric, akin to a master training a pet.

Here is what Hegel had to say:

Crime is an evil, but punishment is not an evil...If you adopt a superficial attitude toward punishment, you brush aside the objective treatment of the righting of a wrong...[W]hen you are concerned with reforming the wrongdoer, making him better, or deterring others, you are treating the wrongdoer not as a man who deserves to be punished because he has done wrong, but as an animal you are trying to train. It is all right to punish animals for this reason, but men deserve to

be punished strictly as a matter of justice.

I found Hegel's comment thought-provoking even though his view differs radically from our contemporary approach to crime and punishment. One's view on the matter is likely be shaped by how he or she views the nature of crime, and whether one views it primarily as a product of misguided rational choices or one's social environment or biology.

What do you think? Should the primary emphasis of prisons be to rehabilitate inmates so they can better contribute to society upon release or to punish them "as a matter of justice"? Or should punishment and rehabilitation be emphasized equally?

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