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Corrections policy can and should be assessed in terms of its practical effectiveness, but as discussions of the topic quickly show, a moral dimension exists as well. When evaluating our treatment of prisoners from this moral perspective, we can use two questions as guides: what kind of people do we want to be, and whom does this particular policy or action help?

Criminologist Nils Christie asks, "By how much does society corrupt *itself* with a planned and calculated administration of pain to offenders?" We are affected by the way we choose to treat others, and this is true whether "we" refers to individuals or to society. Thus, when corrections policy includes punishments that go far beyond the basic deprivations of liberty needed to restrain a person from doing harm, it is not only the prisoners who are affected. Those who carry out the punishments (and, perhaps, those who endorse or even simply condone them) are affected as well. When a prisoner is denied medical care, or assaulted by a corrections officer, or locked in isolation and denied human contact, it means that we have decided it is all right to treat another human being this way. That says something about who we are, or who we are willing to be.

Winston Churchill argued that attitude toward treatment of crime and criminals "is one of the most unflinching tests of the civilization of any country." He continued: "... a constant heartsearching by all charged with the duty of punishment, ... tireless efforts toward the discovery of curative and regenerative processes, and an unfaltering faith that there is a treasure, if you can only find it, in the heart of every man -- these are the symbols in which the treatment of crime and criminals mark and measure the stored-up strength of a nation, and are the sign and proof of the living virtue in it."

It is possible, of course, to see prisoners as outside the bounds of our common humanity - and indeed the temptation to do so is very strong. Jerome Miller, former Commissioner of Massachusetts Department of Youth Services, observes that current corrections policies are based on the view "that those who break the law or those who are violent or those who do horrific things are not like us." And if they are not like us, not *of* us, then any harsh treatment is justified. Ironically, but actually quite significantly, this

dehumanization of others is exactly the basis upon which many an offender is able to justify his or her own crimes.

So we must ask: how do we believe in treating other people -- even people who have done terrible harm? How do *we* want to act, what do we want to be like, what beliefs or principles do we want to have underlie our actions and policies? Jerome Miller also writes, "While [prisons] lock away those who offend our sensibilities, they also allow us to escape the deliberation we might otherwise expect from a compassionate society." From a moral perspective, the challenge is to engage in that deliberation anyway, and to try to shape corrections policies out of that deliberation.

And then it is worth asking of a policy or action, "Whom does it help?" Or to put it another way, what moral end does it achieve? Many people clearly believe that retribution, vengeance, a wreaking of further harm, does serve a moral purpose -- doing to the offender what the offender did to someone else. But this is actually the most base level of moral reasoning, the kind we try to urge children to move beyond when we tell them that "he hit me first!" isn't sufficient justification for throwing one's own punches.

Even more important is the fact that inflicting extra suffering on an offender doesn't *actually* help anyone, not even the original victim. Renny Cushing of Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights observes, "Sometimes people think it's a zero-sum game: if they can make someone else feel pain, theirs will go away. I just don't think it works that way." When we inflict pain on an offender we may believe that as a society we are trying to ease the suffering of the victim, but if Cushing is correct then that particular moral justification needs rethinking. If we ask, of inadequate medical care or physical assaults or the sensory deprivation of isolation units or any other harsh, punitive treatment of prisoners, "Whom does it help?", we might come to find that the answer is no one, least of all ourselves.

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