

## Why Punishment and Justice Are Not The Same Thing

I am writing this in the week that Ian Huntley has been sentenced and Saddam Hussein apprehended. There has been a lot of talk about retribution, justice, and the punishment fitting the crime.

The business of psychotherapy is generally more concerned with helping those who are the victims of oppression and exploitation rather than the perpetrators. However, after all the hours I've spent teasing apart the threads of causation, and finding meaning in what seem like acts of cruel and pointless wickedness, I see that the difference between victims and oppressors is small indeed. Perpetrators generally do nasty things to others because someone was nasty to them. In that sense, perpetrators received their punishment before they committed their offence. Their punishment preceded the crime. They were hurt for no reason and so they seek to hurt someone else. In their sense of injustice, their hurt, and their outrage lie the origins of their own cruel and oppressive behaviour. Wickedness, cruelty, and injustice are contagious. Victims so easily become perpetrators.

Punishment is based upon the idea that people behave themselves for fear of it. In fact, most of us behave relatively decently because we set standards for ourselves not because we fear punishment by others. Not even police states have the power to control people if enough people decide not to recognise their legitimacy. If anything more than a small number of us decide to flout the law, there simply aren't enough police officers to stop us. Governments are not nearly so powerful as we imagine. When the Poll Tax was introduced, the level of non-compliance was so high it had to be scrapped.

Gandhi said that the philosophy of an eye for an eye leads to all of us being blinded. We should not be asking who is responsible for committing acts of wickedness, whether it's a crime of violence against a child, or the injustice of us in the West promoting unfair international trading leading to poverty in the developing world. We should ask who will be responsible for promoting the sense of care and community which we all need in order to be truly ourselves, safe in the company of one another.

As individuals, few of us are powerful enough to have someone else thrown into prison or to impose the death penalty, but we all have lesser punishments: a sharp word, the withdrawal of cooperation, the blocking of a colleague's promotion. What choice do you make: to punish, or to promote justice? Punishment and justice are not the same thing at all.

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Responses to this article are warmly welcomed.

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