

Is it wrong to punish prisoners: Balancing harmony with justice.

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The very rapid developments taking place in brain imaging science is creating a tension between long-held concepts of on the one hand responsibility and justice, and on the other understanding and mercy. A burgeoning body of neuroscience knowledge is adding to what social workers and counselors have known for a long time. Early psychosocial deprivation predisposes some individuals to a life of violence, and in addition poor brain functioning also constitutes an important risk factor a criminal career. Furthermore, the brain circuits found to be impaired in offenders parallel the brain circuits found to underlie moral decision-making. If a young baby suffers trauma, abuse, and insults to brain structure / function early on in life, and if these factors predispose them to violence, and if they were not responsible for the brain and social trauma they suffered, are they truly responsible for their actions? Do we really have freedom of will given that neuroscience is increasingly demonstrating a neural basis to behavior? Is the neural circuitry underling morality compromised in offenders? And if so, is it morally wrong of us to punish prisoners? This plenary session will explore these tensions which go to the heart of the conference theme: how should we appropriately promote harmony, mercy, and understanding of criminal offending while at the same time maintaining justice, law, and a sense of responsibility in a world torn with conflict and violence?