

A STATEMENT ON PUNISHMENT

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The use of punishment is being widely debated, especially in connection with education and therapy. I am frequently said to be opposed to all forms of punishment, and I should like to make the following correction.

Punishment is usually used to the advantage of the punisher, but there are exceptions, and they can sometimes be justified. Some autistic children, for example, will seriously injure themselves or engage in other excessive behavior unless drugged or restrained, and other treatment is then virtually impossible. If brief and harmless aversive stimuli, made precisely contingent on self-destructive or other excessive behavior, suppress the behavior and leave the children free to develop in other ways, I believe it can be justified. When taken out of context, such stimuli may seem less than humane, but they are not to be distinguished from the much more painful stimuli sometimes needed in dentistry and various medical practices. To remain satisfied with punishment without exploring nonpunitive alternatives is a real mistake.

Except in mating and care of young, the social behavior of animals is almost wholly punitive. Territory and other possessions are defended with force or threat of force. Presumably that was also once true of the human species, and those who have the power to treat others aversively still often do so. There are unwanted consequences; including escape and counterattack.

The alternative is positive reinforcement. Compared with negative reinforcement or punishment its effect is somewhat delayed and hence not as easily learned. The delay is so critical that other species do not use positive reinforcement. (Animals do many things which reinforce the behavior of others but not because it is a reinforcing consequence.)

There is no doubt of the gains made by practices which are uniquely (and appropriately called) humane, but only a start has been made. Ethical, religious, and governmental laws are primarily punitive, especially when designed to restrain aversive behavior. The exceptions which testify to the uniqueness of human behavior are rare. We have not yet discovered adequate nonpunitive practices to replace the aversive part of our genetic endowment. For example, we are far from abandoning the use of force in international relations or maintain domestic order. People living closely together, and that includes teachers and students, therapists and clients, can seldom avoid all forms of punishment.

I believe that there is no longer any use for corporal punishment in schools and much to be gained by suppressing it. Of other forms of punishment, then, the main question is severity. Too harsh a punishment for missing an assignment would far from adequate for bringing a gun or knife into the classroom.