

The Ethics of Punishment
OLLI, fall, 2025
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Course Description

Crime and punishment are on everyone's mind. From Bay Area recall elections to Presidential speeches about "Alligator Alcatraz" and frustrated rants on NextDoor, people are upset about crime. Because they are upset, their thinking about crime is not always rational or clear. And reason and clarity are needed because crime is a complex and difficult issue.

Understanding crime and punishment involves the disciplines of sociology, psychology, economics, and neuroscience. The purpose of this course is to employ philosophy—especially ethics—to clarify and deepen our thinking about how we should respond to crime, and whether the morally optimal response is punishment.

The course will employ lectures, some video clips, and class discussions to explore these issues.

Schedule

Week One, October 16

Discussion of mock cases. Contemporary approaches to ethics. The theory of retributive justice.

Week Two, October 23

The theory of restorative justice. Are retributive and restorative justice compatible? The ethics of punishment, forgiveness, and atonement.

Week Three, October 30

The issue of the death penalty. Discussion of film, *Dead Man Walking*.

The social contract: the duty of the state to protect and the right of the people to be protected.

Week Four, November 6

The theory of transformative justice, and the prison abolition movement.

The issue of moral responsibility. What is free choice? How are we to understand force of circumstance, the influence of environment, the nature of the individual brain, and the bearing they have on the issue of just punishment? Revisit our mock cases.

