Addressing Sin Nature  
Negative Case by Joel Erickson  
  
*Charles Colson, the late founder and president of Prison Fellowship. (Credit: PrisonFellowship.org)*

This case is designed to nullify the value clash and hone in on the applications and ideologies undergirding your opponent’s case. If your opponent runs an obscure or blatantly skewed value, you can—and should—contest it by running a broad buffer-value such as “justice,” which would coincide neatly with the argumentation in this case.

Poised for parent judges who accept your fundamental assumptions about the sin nature, the opening story about Norwegian prisons likely, if executed correctly, will outweigh any recidivism statistics your opponent references with sheer emotional impact. Your tone and style needs to convey that regardless of how positively your opponent depicts his/her side with detached statistics, outrageous offenses are still being committed on an individual scale. There may very well be 80% who successfully reintegrate into society, but the 20% is portrayed alarmingly in this example. If your opponent constructs his/her entire case out of recidivism statistics, you may opt to supplement this case with some evidence against recidivism.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The first resolutional analysis applies the idealism of socialism and utopian communities to rehabilitation, contending that rehabilitation ignores sin nature. The second resolutional analysis offers a compelling argument to limit the resolution to universal crimes, thereby excluding “rehabilitation works for drug offenders” that your opponent uses. From that point forward, the case plunges into a nuanced, borderline-kritikal assessment of the means and motivations of rehabilitation and retribution, ultimately demonstrating that only retribution provides moral solutions to the moral problems of crime.

Addressing Sin Nature

Charles Colson, founder of the world-renowned Prison Fellowship Ministries,[[2]](#footnote-2) describes his visit to a Norwegian prison.

THE FACT is that a utopian framework has taken away the conceptual tools we need to grapple effectively with genuine evil. And when we cannot name or identify evil, we lose the capacity to deal with it—and ultimately we compound its deadly effects.

I saw this in a tragic way a few years ago during a visit to Norway. The prisons there resemble the snow-draped landscape: cold and white. Officials are proud of their prison system, with its expensive, up-to-date facilities. They brag that, along with the Swedes, they employ the most humane and progressive methods of treatment anywhere in the world, and many penologists agree.

The prison I visited just outside of Oslo was a model maximum-security facility. I was greeted by the warden, a psychiatrist with a clinically detached attitude. As she showed me through the sterile surroundings, which seemed more like a laboratory than a prison, she touted the number of counselors and the types of therapies given to inmates. In fact, we met so many other psychiatrists that I asked the warden how many of the inmates were mental cases.

"All of them, of course," she replied quickly, raising her eyebrows in surprise.

"What do you mean, 'all of them'?"

"Well, anyone who commits a violent crime is obviously mentally unbalanced."

Ah, yes. People are basically good, so anyone who could do something so terrible must be mentally ill. And the solution is therapy. I was seeing the therapeutic model fully realized. Tragically, I would also soon see its failure.

That day I spoke to an audience of inmates. Typically, prison is the one place where I don't have to belabor the message of sin; it's one biblical truth that men and women behind bars know well. But these inmates remained completely unmoved by anything I said, even the invitation to receive Christ. No response. Only glazed expressions.

As I was leaving, however, I was approached by an attractive young correctional officer who identified herself as a Christian. In perfect English she thanked me, then said, "I've prayed for this day, when these men would be confronted with a solid message of sin and salvation." She went on to describe her frustration at having to work within such a flawed system, where there was no concept of personal responsibility, and therefore no reason to seek personal transformation.

Only days later, her criticisms of the system were horribly borne out. By then, I had traveled on to Scotland, and while there, I received an urgent phone call from the Norwegian Prison Fellowship workers. They soberly informed me that the young officer I had met had been given the responsibility of escorting an inmate out to see a movie—part of the inmate's therapy—and on the way back, he had overpowered her, raped her, and then murdered her. [[3]](#footnote-3)

Colson concludes chillingly, “When we refuse to listen to the true diagnosis of the sickness of the soul, we will not find a true remedy, and in the end it will destroy us.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Because moral problems require moral solutions, I encourage you to prioritize retribution above rehabilitation.

# Resolutional Analysis

Before answering my opponent’s arguments, I’ll offer two points of background for the resolution. The first is…

## Point 1: Realism

Because we do not exist in an ideal universe, we should weigh concepts such as rehabilitation and retribution according to how they conform to reality. We must employ a philosophy of realism, apprehending the resolution as it is, not as we would like it to be.

## Impact: Considerations of Human Nature Are Paramount

Most idealistic solutions fail to correspond to sinful human nature. Utopian communities implode because the inherent wickedness of the residents undermines the communities’ lofty ideals. Socialism degenerates into exploitation and totalitarianism because people are innately predisposed to individualism. And rehabilitation fails because it is predicated on the erroneous notion of human goodness. Realism formulates a solution that best accounts for the depravity of man.

## Point 2: Universal Criminality

Nations establish criminal justice systems to enforce the laws and to apprehend lawbreakers. No two countries have the same legal code, and consequently perceive “criminals” differently. In America, Christians are legitimate citizens granted full protection under the U.S. Constitution. Contrast Iran, where Christians are deemed dangerous insurgents whose eradiation is essential to the state’s welfare.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The extreme difference between consideration of “criminals” manifests itself in many other areas, especially drug crime. While Singapore prescribes the death penalty for drug possession,[[6]](#footnote-6) the Netherlands is notorious for permitting widespread distribution and sale of drugs.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Because the concept of a criminal is so contested, we should narrow the resolution’s focus to crimes such as rape, murder, and theft, which are universally denounced around the globe. Only then will we be able to determine whether we should value rehabilitation or retribution *in criminal justice systems*—the scope the resolution specifies.

# Contention: Only Retribution Offers Moral Solutions to Moral Problems

I’ll distill the rationale for this singular contention in three subpoints.

## Subpoint A: Universal Crimes Result from Sin Nature

As I’ve mentioned earlier, crimes such as rape and murder are typically not symptomatic of mental illness or imbalance; rather, they derive from the inherently depraved nature of man. Recall that we are addressing the resolution from the stance of realism—and an integral facet of reality is that each and every one of us possesses an innate predilection to evil.

How does this pertain to rehabilitation and retribution? As Colson writes, “Only two forces hold the sinful nature in check: the restraint of conscience or the restraint of the sword. The less that citizens have of the former, the more the state must employ the latter.”[[8]](#footnote-8) If murders and rapists do not constrain themselves with their consciences, the state must step in to constrain them, using either rehabilitation or retribution.

## Subpoint B: Rehabilitation Treats Crime as a Disease

Rehabilitation is the incarnation of psychologist B.F. Skinner’s famous theory of behaviorism—humans are merely sophisticated biological machines, without consciousness and moral states. Therefore, any action is a reaction to external stimuli in the world. Change the stimuli, change the person’s actions. [[9]](#footnote-9) Applied to rehabilitation, behaviorism proffers that felons commit crimes because of chemical imbalance or negative societal conditions. Change their mental states or external conditions, change the criminal’s actions, the rehabilitative credo goes. Hence, this is why the Norwegian penal system outfits inmates with access to recording studios.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Yet, treating crime as a disease fails to recognize the root cause of crimes such as rape and murder—sin. Invariably, offering the wrong prescription to a problem perpetrates further suffering and grief, culminating the rape and murder I described in my introduction. Additionally, as Amy Brittain writes in *The Washington Post*,

“Hundreds of criminals sentenced by D.C. judges under an obscure local law crafted to give second chances to young adult offenders have gone on to rob, rape or kill residents of the nation’s capital. The original intent of the law was to rehabilitate inexperienced criminals under the age of 22. The District’s Youth Rehabilitation Act allows for shorter sentences for some crimes and an opportunity for offenders to emerge with no criminal record. But a Washington Post investigation has found a pattern of violent offenders returning rapidly to the streets and committing more crimes. Hundreds have been sentenced under the act multiple times. In dozens of cases, D.C. judges were able to hand down Youth Act sentences shorter than those called for under mandatory minimum laws designed to deter armed robberies and other violent crimes. The criminals have often repaid that leniency by escalating their crimes of violence upon release.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

## Subpoint C: Retribution Acknowledges Moral Failure

By definition, retribution provides punishment to satiate a moral debt. It acknowledges crime for what it is—a sin problem—and combats the moral problem with a moral solution—punishment to balance the scales, to repay for the evils generated by crime. Guided by utilitarianism, rehabilitation cannot acknowledge a moral authority—but retribution recognizes the moral failing of rapists and murders and serves them their just desserts.

In retrospect, Colson wrote about the tragic rape and murder of the Norwegian prison officer this way: “When we embrace nonmoral categories to explain away moral evil, we fail to take it seriously, and we fail to constrain it.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Rehabilitation cannot grasp the moral dimension of crime, but retribution takes moral evil seriously. As a result, only the negative answers moral problems with moral solutions. Thank you.

Affirmative Brief: Addressing Sin Nature

You’ll have a hard time contesting the first resolutional analysis point—after all, defenses for ignoring the real world are few and far between. However, the second resolutional analysis of “universal criminality” is easier to dispute. Debaters impose limiting analyses for exclusively one reason: to exclude any arguments ordinarily under the scope of the resolution that they find “inconvenient” or disadvantageous. Even if there are only a few crimes that all nations agree on, should we limit the resolution to those crimes alone? Common sense seems to suggest otherwise. Why not instead limit the resolution to the majority of crimes, which in the United States are drug crimes? Limiting resolutional analyses appears evasive and arbitrary; acknowledge that while it is important to consider universal crimes, your case accounts for far more than the negative’s.

This case’s major flaw is that it capitulates to a pragmatic mindset. It makes the claim that rehabilitation inevitably fails, but doesn’t necessarily cite direct evidence to substantiate that claim. If you’re loaded with recidivism statistics, now is the time to turn the “realism” analysis and show the judge that your stance is more grounded in the real world than your opponent’s.

The case relies predominantly on the work of Charles Colson. However, Colson’s Prison Fellowship Ministries promotes “restorative justice,” which some philosophers consider a derivative of rehabilitation. Therefore, Colson’s stance is more nuanced—not necessarily condemning all forms of rehabilitation but those which do not incorporate the reality of the sin nature and the redemptive work of Christ.

1. I am currently working on an opposition brief on recidivism, set to release later in the midseason for Monument Members. Watch for it. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Prison Fellowship Ministries, <https://www.prisonfellowship.org> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Charles Colson and Nancy Pearcey, *How Now Shall We Live?* Tyndale, 1999, pgs. 190-191. <https://books.google.com/books?id=Cmlf9UnQa0EC&pg=PT276&lpg=PT276&dq> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Charles Colson and Nancy Pearcey, *How Now Shall We Live?* Tyndale, 1999, pg. 191. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. OpenDoors (a ministry dedicated to reaching Christians in oppressed countries), “Iran.” <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/iran/> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ghosh, Palash, “Singapore: Drug Laws and the Death Penalty.” *International Business Times*, June 22, 2011. <http://www.ibtimes.com/singapore-drug-laws-death-penalty-292911> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. “Those Dutch drug laws in a nutshell: 5 things to know about pot policy in the Netherlands.” *Fox News,* March 7, 2014. <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2014/03/07/those-dutch-drug-laws-in-nutshell-5-things-to-know-about-pot-policy-in.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Charles Colson and Nancy Pearcey, *How Now Shall We Live?* Tyndale, 1999, pg. 191. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. B.F. Skinner, *Walden Two*. McMillian, 1976. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Sterbenz, Christina, “Why Norway’s Prison System Is so Successful,” *Business Insider*, Dec. 11, 2014. <http://www.businessinsider.com/why-norways-prison-system-is-so-successful-2014-12> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Brittain, Amy, “Second-chance law for young criminals puts violent offenders back on D.C. streets.” *The Washington Post*, December 3, 2016. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/second-chance-law-for-young-criminals-puts-violent-offenders-back-on-dc-streets/2016/12/02/fcb56c74-8bc1-11e6-875e-2c1bfe943b66_story.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Charles Colson and Nancy Pearcey, *How Now Shall We Live?* Tyndale, 1999, pg. 191. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)