

The lash is the punishment of the slave

Excerpt from *The History of Corporal Punishment* by George Ryley Scott, Random House UK Ltd., 1968

Pages 189-191

...There has probably never been an evil of any description for which it was not possible to dig up some argument in its favour, some excuse for its continued existence. The justification for the existence or extension of a practice lies not in the fact that it possesses certain virtues, but that those virtues outweigh its drawbacks, or that it serves society in some essential form for which there is no alternative method available.

By no species of argument can anything of this nature be claimed for corporal punishment. Its evils, its drawbacks, and its disadvantages, as we have seen in the process of our inquiry, outweigh hugely and in every possible way, its few virtues— virtues which are based upon the most dubious foundations.

The true fundament of any value which corporal punishment possesses as a preventive of crime is the fear which it instils in the culprit— actual or potential. Now fear is a powerful deterrent. It operates in the child, and in the adult, in the most primitive of races and in the highest stratum of civilized society. But there are many kinds of fear. Fear of death is a necessary and valuable preventive of injury and suffering. Fear of displeasing one's parents is an admirable trait in the child. Fear of alienating public opinion, and fear of losing one's liberty or one's social position, are powerful antidotes to sin and crime in adult society. But the fear induced by corporal punishment belongs primarily to none of these categories. It is essentially and pre-eminently the fear of physical pain. It is the fear inevitably associated with suffering of a degrading, deliberate and debasing nature. Fear which is associated with and restricted to physical pain, as a punitive factor, possesses no true reformatory power...

The individual, whether child or adult, who can be kept good or moral through fear or personal suffering only, is a pitiful creature. His reformation, or his good conduct, is purchased at a price which is as terrible as it is deplorable. His existence is that of a slave. In the time of the ancient Romans whipping was deemed to be a form of punishment more to be feared, because of its inherent degradation, than the death penalty. Its brand was emblematic of subjection of the basest kind. Through the centuries it lost few of its debasing features. Well might Lord Justice Mathew, the famous nineteenth-century dispenser of justice, say that "the lash is the punishment of the slave."

The dog which has been whipped into obedience is an object which can excite nothing but the most profound pity in every person who claims to possess any humane feelings at all. It is a cowed and dejected creature, and once it has been whipped into such a state the recovery of its former spirits and courage is impossible. It is exactly the same with the child or the man whose morality or reverence for law and order has been whipped into him. *If no other argument could be advanced against corporal punishment, because of this one reason alone, the case for its abolition would seem to be clear and complete...*

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