Article 4: What Have I Learned About Correctional Practice After a Professional Lifetime in Prisons Research? (ACJ20-A004)

WHAT HAVE I LEARNED ABOUT CORRECTIONAL PRACTICE AFTER A PROFESSIONAL LIFETIME IN PRISONS RESEARCH?

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Abstract

In 2019, feeling somewhat burned out and demoralised by what I was seeing in prisons, I applied for a 3-year Leverhulme Major Research Fellowship and took a break. I wanted write a book synthesising my 'life's work' in prisons, trying to find the narrative: what had I learned about prisons in all this time spent researching them (30 years)? Was there a way of articulating what went on in the best prisons, in the equilibrium, the ordinary human place where moments of expansion or self-redefinition occurred? Would a full description of this kind of work help to grow more of it? Finally, 5 years later, the book is complete. I have called it Aristotle's Prison: A Search for Humanity in Tragic Places. It will be published by Oxford University Press in 2026. Writing it took me in some unexpected directions. In this article I introduce some of its key themes and try to reflect on some of its practical implications.

Keywords: Humanity, Moral climates, Prison staff, Human survival, Personal growth

Introduction - The current scene: a lack of moral and political imagination?
Around 11 million people are held in prisons throughout the world, either as pre-trial detainees or as sentenced prisoners (World Prison Brief, 2024). The overall trend is upwards. The world prison population has grown by 27% since the year 2000. Prisons have become big business as the private sector offers apparently affordable and speedy solutions to the expansion problem, and experiments with technology and other innovations. Prison population size is, as we know, largely a political choice.

In England and Wales, the imprisonment rate is just over the world mean at 145 per 100,000 population (up from 124 per 100,000 in 2000), producing a prison population of around 88,000. This figure brings with it substantial overcrowding (24% overall) despite the opening of several large new prisons and an increase in the size and complexity of existing sites. Construction has begun in the grounds of Highpoint prison in Suffolk, near Cambridge, making it the largest prison in the UK. It will hold over 2,000 prisoners once the new accommodation opens in summer 2027. How did prisons get so large, when our most respected and consensus-building analysis of prisons and their troubles clearly stated that prisons "should not normally hold more than 400 prisoners" (Woolf & Tumim, 1991)? Large prisons are hard to operate, navigate, and permeate socially.

Managing overcrowding (and other troubles, like increasing violence) is currently distracting senior officials in England and Wales from addressing fundamental questions about what prisons are for, whether they are achieving their stated aims, and what 'good enough' prisons might look like. The Prisons Inspectorate have declared serious concerns about the quality of regimes in most prisons as they fall below standard expectations on respect, safety, purposeful activity, and resettlement (HMIP 2025). The Chief Inspector sent four Urgent Notification letters to the Secretary of State for Justice in 2024 to 2025. He found 'appalling outcomes' at Wandsworth, Manchester, Winchester and Rochester (the first category C prison where this protocol has been invoked). There is a crisis of prison staff recruitment, retention, and well-being, partly caused by deteriorating regime and workforce conditions. Lower staffing levels and inexperience have led to a retreat from prison landings, or a reluctance by officers to use their authority, altering the balance of power in favour of influential prisoners. Homicides have become 'a thing': around 7 or 8 **per year** in recent years[1]. This is unprecedented.

My research colleagues and I at the Prisons Research Centre in Cambridge carried out what we call an 'MQPL +' at Rochester in 2016 (Measuring the Quality of Prison Life-Plus). This is a team-based moral and cultural diagnosis of a prison based on observation, interviews, and a moral quality of life survey with staff and prisoners. It is a methodology we developed over many years, which produces a reliable account of a prison's functioning and treatment of prisoners. We have carried out over 40 such exercises over the last 15 years, most at the request of the Prison Service in order to inform improvement agendas. Eight of us were present and immersed in the prison for most of a week[2]. The results, and the experience, were dismal. People said things like:

'I would argue that no one runs the prison. It just exists.' (Prisoner)

'They've beaten me. This prison has beaten me. I've been Rochester-ed.' (Prisoner)

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1   *Erratum: please note that the print version of this article incorrectly shows this figure as a percentage.*

2   *Alison Liebling, Ben Crewe, Ezgi Taboglu, Martha Morey, Amy Ludlow, Aiden Cope, Bethany Schmidt, & Borah Kant.*

'The prison is what it is … There are no strengths, really.' (Officer)

Staff were disaffected and openly admitted to doing the bare minimum in their day (we observed several staff sitting in offices, behind closed doors). They were not interested in rehabilitation or meaningful engagement, nor were they aware of the impact they had on prisoners when they used a dismissive tone, were inconsistent, or failed to follow through with requests or promises. The prison was disorganised and uninspiring in a slow-paced kind of way, and drug use was rife. The MQPL scores were very low (14/17 dimensions were scored below a 'neutral' three out of five). The dimension 'humanity' was scored at 2.74, meaning that few prisoners agreed that they were being treated with humanity. This is below a threshold we would argue should represent a bare minimum standard (Auty and Liebling 2024). Senior managers were a bit helpless.

Researching a bleak prison that still had the ancient sign, 'Rochester Borstal', etched on a door was heart breaking, like so much of what we saw from around 2015. We were measuring moral decline. Why did it take another ten years before this problem became 'urgent'? We have an outstanding prisons inspectorate, a research literate prison service, and a history of relationship-based, values-driven innovation in approaches to prisons work, including the once lauded Borstal system. Prisons have never been problem-free places, but something has got substantially worse. Austerity has brought all the risks of 'the new penology' to the fore. An over-bureaucratised, de-professionalised, risk-averse, politically-vulnerable prison system cannot act constructively, or in the public interest. As Simon and Feeley warned several decades ago, the new penology has 'trouble with the concept of humanity' (1995: p. 173).

One of the things that drew me into prisons research was the life, energy and humanity I found in unexpected places (therapeutic communities, small units, lifer units, workshops, gyms, and so on), as skilled prison staff and specialists worked with hard-to-reach populations to help provide support, and sometimes turn lives around. Prisons were very varied in their moral climates and practices, but they were not unbearable or cruel, on the whole. Some were inspired. What prison staff achieved at their best seemed like a masterpiece to me. A combination of ingredients appeared in these prisons – vision, compassion, courage, vocation … the creation of spaces where human capacities could be nurtured. These prisons were led by outstanding Governors. Perhaps what I saw, in those early days, was something like 'moral giftedness' (Briggs, 2000: p. 13). I have tried, in the book I will introduce below, to describe what these prisons are like, what underpins them, and how hard people in them have to work in order to find stability and create purpose:

> Underlying the masterpiece there is muddle and adjustment, compromise and tension, trial and error, but there is also an 'infrastructure' in which people feel they have value (Liebling, forthcoming).

Three years after our study of Rochester prison, our longstanding rolling research contracts with HMPPS, which included a requirement to carry out at least three MQPL + exercises per year, mainly in 'prisons of operational concern', ended. COVID put a stop to all prisons research. Regimes were curtailed. The timing was fortuitous, in a bleak kind of way. Feeling somewhat burned out and demoralised by what I was seeing, I applied for a three-year Leverhulme Major Research Fellowship and took a break. I wanted to write a book synthesising my 'life's work' in prisons, trying to find the narrative: what had I learned about prisons in all this time spent researching them (30 years)? Was

there a way of articulating what went on in the best prisons, in the equilibrium, the ordinary human place where moments of expansion or self-redefinition occurred? Would a full description of this kind of work help to grow more of it? Finally, five years later, the book is complete. I have called it *Aristotle's Prison: A Search for Humanity in Tragic Places*. It will be published by Oxford University Press in 2026. Writing it took me in some unexpected directions.

Ordinary virtues, human survival and personal growth

Without humanity, 'a person lives in the dominion of death' (Liebling, forthcoming; and Norrie, 2025: p. 143).

Aristotle's Prison is about what kinds of environments grow the life force rather than extinguish it, and why. It is anchored in data, gathered throughout a professional lifetime in prisons research, and draws on different projects which have all pointed in the same direction: telling us that a) prisons have moral ecologies, and b) prisoners, like all human beings, need the virtues. There is, it seems, a moral reality to the universe. The empirical data from three research projects on suicides in prison, for example, show that we are more likely to 'opt for death' (as Camus put it) in morally depriving environments: in places where we don't matter. This helps us to address the 'truly philosophical problem' of suicide: working out what makes life bearable or meaningful. Human beings do better in environments that support our humanness. There are 'vital needs' of the human soul that operate like hunger (as Simone Weil said). The absence of these ordinary virtues – in and out of prison – endangers our survival.

Survivable prisons *pay attention* to human persons: they are responsive, fair, safe, active, and well-balanced. I describe the moral quality thresholds that survivable prisons need to reach, and the efforts some senior management teams have made to get there. Such climates are difficult to realise. Sometimes they are achieved and then lost again. Increasing imprisonment use has made it harder to sustain this minimum threshold.

What about beyond survival? The rest of my book considers the key differences between disabling and enabling moral climates more generally, drawing on data from the best prisons I have studied, as well as the more usual, depriving majority. When prisoners are treated, and offered skilled help, as experiencing subjects, with possible futures, they are more likely to become fuller selves. Prisoners describe these best places as 'oases', in contrast to the 'deserts' they are more used to (Liebling, forthcoming). In these prisons, 'the wire to the world begins to vibrate' (Rosa, 2022); 'actual life' is found. Beyond survival, a long way from despair, is growth.

Philosophers and theologians (and more recently, some social theorists and prison psychotherapists) have been saying for centuries that human beings flourish in certain social conditions. This book developed from seeing, again and again, the contrast between life-sapping and exceptional, life-generating, prison regimes. In one prison in particular I found a place where humanising moments seemed to be built into the foundations. The prison was by no means perfect (what prison could be?) and these ingredients can be seen elsewhere, but something made it possible to see the differences starkly.

Briefly put, an outstanding prison has a *clear direction of travel*. Staff think carefully about who they

are locking up. This was, in the case I describe, explicitly trained for:

> It's like a sort of mindfulness. When that key is in the door, think about the man behind the door. Staff feedback was, when they do this, they have a much better day. It seems so small, but it is transformative (Specialist).

This prison housed two Psychologically-Informed Planned Environments (PIPES) operated as a joint venture between National Health Service and Prison Service staff. The intention of these units also informed practice elsewhere in the establishment, which was unusually relational. A combination of psycho-social expertise and ordinary humanity took the prison environment over a typical threshold, at which point everything that mattered changed. This was not just more of something; the prison entered a completely different state. More of the parts were working. The 'between' became a source of energy.

Observing what I saw in this prison in particular led me back to a literature I thought I had left behind: to novelist George Eliot and the philosophers she translated; to philosopher-theologian Martin Buber, psychoanalyst Erik Erikson, and social theorist, Hartmut Rosa. I found a good fit between the data from several prison projects and their ideas.

In many ways, human beings act like the rest of nature, which is full of not-quite-formed potential. Even remote or tiny features of the environment can profoundly affect the movement of this potential, in positive or negative directions. There is an 'implicate order' underlying what is explicit and measurable: this includes intentions, values, meaning, attitudes, speaking tones, beliefs or assumptions about our potential, and understandings about crime, punishment and human nature. These ideas circulate around and act on us in ways we cannot see. But they shape outcomes. So (I am told) the behaviour of a particle (in quantum physics) is determined by the shape of the whole[3]. Spinoza (who is coming back into fashion) described this 'natural wholeness' in his 17th century *Ethics* (translated by George Eliot in the 1850s). Many practitioners understand this connected-up fact about the world deeply, but don't have a language in which to express it professionally, or an evidence base that supports them. Some are experiencing a feeling of crisis at the move away from relational aspects of their work. Paying more attention to 'the dynamic nature of the whole' may help in prison work not just because relational environments *add* something to existing practice, but because this model reflects reality more accurately than our modern 'component'-based models (that is, the arguably fragmented intervention approach).

Survivable prisons treat prisoners as fully alive. They do not 'contain' but facilitate. They build 'a between': a resonant place whose vibrations we actively respond to, where we are recognised as whole, complex people with inner lives and future potential. Martin Buber described this idea using the language of *I-Thou* relations. In these kinds of environments, because of how they are seen, prisoners are more likely to find something *within themselves* that leads them in the direction of vitality and hope. At the same time, they learn, through being treated attentively (with something Rowan Williams calls 'reverence'), that the world is made up of other persons - of *Thou*'s. 'If I am a *Thou*, you must be too'. These experiences, available in special, exceptional places, between peers, or between staff

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3   *A physicist talking about measurement said, 'I describe it in terms of what it might become next' (Allday, personal communication 2025). This is tricky: applied to human beings this does not imply 'blind faith' in a particular outcome, but it is a helpful conceptual orientation.*

and prisoners, can be life changing. People who have had insufficient experience of being treated as a *Thou* but continue to be treated as an *It*, may fail to develop their full potential or see others clearly. I argue in my book that being treated as a *Thou* helps us become a better *I*.

Contrasting prisons with high rates of suicide and distress, lower rates of suicide and distress, and prisons in which meaning and personal growth become possible, suggests (to me) that the life force seems to be affirmed or extinguished by the presence or absence of a particular vision of personhood, structured by this concept of 'the between'. This suggestion is consistent with recent work by Hartmut Rosa (and others) who argue that our relationship to the world requires 'resonance' if it is to be a good one (2019).

Prison officers' relationships with prisoners have another, related purpose. They act like 'good lighting' on a prison wing, making right decisions and fine judgments easier to make. When they are more *I-Thou* than *I-It* - that is, when prisoners are treated as 'experiencing subjects' rather than 'experienced objects' – the day goes better. Without relationships, prison officers operate in a fog. Philosophers have talked about this too: we need be able to read each other's faces if we are to form fair visions of each other. Sometimes prisoners *are* violent. This is a dynamic rather than static state shaped by environmental conditions (as Professor David Cooke recently argued at the ICPA conference, 2025; see also Cooke, 2023). The problem for staff on busy prison wings is making refined and reasonable judgments about risk and potential without closing down possibilities or creating a sense of injustice. This is a fine craft. Penal policy should not be making this fundamental task harder than it already is. The best prison officers develop, and use, considerable practical wisdom[4]. As one prison officer said:

> If I did everything by the book out there it would be chaos. You need characters to do this. It only works within relationships. The problem is the trap – of not being consistent and getting favourites. Young staff fall into that trap. It takes time to find the balance. You can play around with the rules but in a genuine way, not as a weak link. You have to get the right result, think deeper than your eight-hour shift. (Officer, fieldwork notes)

Thinking 'deeper than your eight hour shift' requires reflection, the building of professional confidence, the support of managers, and reasonable numbers on a wing.

In overly managerialist, new penological, *I-It* climates the world becomes mute, sterile, and damaging; individuals become devitalized. Many prison services have hardened into a world of *It*. This creates existential problems for those trying to work in the system, as well as those trying to endure it. These dynamics are at work in human lives in and out of prison:

> Without sustaining relationships with others, our selves unravel. But we also need order and boundaries. (Liebling, forthcoming).

Implications for practice: What would lead to improvement?
> Give us a prison for 10 years, a category B establishment. Let us rewrite the way we run it. Make it thoroughly relational. Give it proper leadership. Train and supervise the staff. Recruit them carefully. Don't make it cheap. Bring in the arts, any kind of creativity, enrichment, proper work, psychosocial therapy, the community. Keep it person-centred. This is soul matter.

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4   *I hope to take this idea forward in an applied way with my colleagues Joel Harvey and Laura Bowden in the future.*

(Retired policy, clinical and commissioning advisor 2025)

The book has been written not as a 'practice-guide' but as an analysis of what prison environments do, what good looks like, why this is the case, and what some troubling threats to good practice seem to be. What follows are first thoughts about the policy and practitioner implications of my account. Some are broad and might be politically out of reach but if we don't talk about them, they are even less likely to be within reach. Other suggestions are more concrete.

One of my conclusions is that just punishment is impossible in unjust prisons. Sentencing practice needs to make meaningful and survivable prison terms likely (that is, more than occasionally possible). Prisoners should have access to moral opportunities in prisons: to meaningful days and relationships with the world. They should not be subjected to forms of imprisonment that treat them as 'dead souls' (Hamm 2019). Nothing short of a radical re-think about the way we currently punish is going to solve the current prisons crisis. Prison staff are voting with their feet – they don't want to do meaningless or dangerous work. We can't expand our way out of this catastrophe: increasing capacity causes as many problems as it resolves.

There are resources out there that might help in that rethinking process: the stage play Punch[5] is stimulating cultural as well as policy change, building knowledge about the role of restorative justice by demonstrating its power. The play is reaching many publics and changing minds about retributive-only models. A thoughtful book by punishment scholar Professor Alan Norrie (*Rethinking Criminal Justice: Punishment, Abolition and Moral Psychology*) proposes that mature responses to offending seek reconciliation, forgiveness and atonement. Criminal justice should be designed 'to reflect our nature as human beings', he suggests, as 'the animal that thinks and loves' (Norrie, 2025). Organisations like the Common Ground Justice Project, Penal Reform Solutions, Untold, Unlocking Potential, The Growth App, Spark Inside, Shift, and many others in the UK, are working energetically to challenge the assumptions that 'the public' (including victims) simply want more punishment or that people who have offended can't have good futures. The public want to feel safe and live in decent communities. The vast majority of those who face prison sentences want to live good or better lives in those communities too. A grass roots/lived experience campaign to humanise and scale back criminal justice is brewing. We should not leave this bigger picture out in working to improve penal systems.

Closer to the ground, one of the fundamental changes required within existing penal systems is prioritising staff professionalism and nurturing or valuing the professional identity of prison officers. Officers are left to navigate most of the key contradictions of imprisonment without guidance. The penal vision needs to be clearer. Prison staff training needs to be longer, broader, and more varied. It needs to equip staff with all the tools they need to do the job with professional confidence. The Unlocked model, with its expert approach to teaching and learning, coaching, mentoring and support, and its careful placement of new entrant staff in prisons in clusters, has 'blazed a trail' over ten years. This experience should be built on (see Fletcher-Wood and Porter 2025). Their catch phrase, 'purpose not power' captures something of the role of *intention* in leading better prison landings. The Prison Service organisation needs to follow through on its promise to 'build back better' via a more professional approach to staff recruitment, training and development. Governors, for their part, should be carefully grown, supported, and matched to prisons. They should stay longer than the

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5   *A theatre production by James Graham based on the book, Right from Wrong by Jacob Dunne (2023).*

startling average of two years but be relieved when they struggle. The best Governors seem to me to be always building 'a between'. They like staff and prisoners. They also need mentoring, strong networks, and succession plans.

Some principles a decent penal system should adhere to are transparency (don't hide or obfuscate data), respect (anything that dehumanises people won't work), balance (don't neglect violence but don't be subsumed by it) and a growth-orientation. A prison that is truly person-centred has to prioritise and work with human *potential*. Rehabilitative, intentionally humane prisons, that are also well-organised and consistently managed, tend to have better outcomes in all the areas that practitioners care about. They have less violence, fewer suicides, and lower levels of anger or political charge, which can fuel radicalisation.

Managers should make every possible use of humanising and relationship-building practices: Dialogue, music and songwriting, art, theatre, education, philosophy, horticulture, yoga, meditation: anything that builds a 'between'. One of the most promising developments I have witnessed in recent years has been the willingness of prison services to draw on lived experience organisations with hugely beneficial effects (albeit there are also risks of exploitation). These are inherently *Thou* contributions. The shared understanding in those who work in such organisations structures out disrespect (see Schmidt 2020).

Research can help those planning and managing prisons in all kinds of ways, but only if some kind of infrastructure is built. Mutual understanding grows with time, trust, and exposure to shared struggles. Sometimes the deepest struggles practitioners face are surprisingly intellectual: for example, it helps to make distinctions (e.g., some forms of order provide 'freedom' rather than 'justice'; some of the most intense struggles between staff and managers are rooted in their different time horizons[6]). Our primary task, as a research community, is to get the description right. Studying outstanding practice – prisons in the equilibrium, or prison officers at their best – might get us further than always studying 'problems'. If we do our prisons research carefully enough, we can sometimes find where the line between humanity and inhumanity might be drawn, or where the kind of balance that builds better futures might be found. Feeding this back into a receptive organisation that 'talks back' feels like a purposeful part of our growth as prison scholars.

Finally, we should always consider implementation. The best initiatives I have seen in my prisons research life have been exceptionally well and self-consciously implemented. Often the right policies and ideas already exist. They just never operate as they should. Better outcomes can be found in evaluations if we factor out those prisons that never did what they intended. How to sustain good practice over time, particularly in the face of political ambush, is another open-ended question.

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6   *Prison staff are inherently tradition and experience-oriented, whereas senior managers are increasingly abstract and future-oriented.*

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