

2026–27 Value Debate Sample Negative Case:

Value of Human Dignity

I. Introduction

"Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done."¹

The Equal Justice Initiative is a nonprofit organization that provides legal representation to people who have been illegally convicted, unfairly sentenced, or abused in prison. Its founder, Bryan Stevenson, the author of this quote, created the Institute on the fundamental premise that all people, even the guilty, carry a humanity that demands dignity. Because I believe in human dignity, I stand **resolved: It is NOT just for a criminal justice system to value retribution over rehabilitation.**

Let us first begin with an understanding of what today's resolution is asking us to decide.

II. Resolutational Analysis: What is "Just?"

The resolution pivots in a single word: "just." *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines "just" as "acting or being in conformity with what is morally upright or good."²

Therefore, our conception of what is "just" for today's debate round should not be one of revenge, but rather of moral virtue. It is the difference between a question of what we *can* do and what we *should* do. In the context of a criminal justice system, an institution that deals entirely with people, the question for us specifically today is this: what is the "morally upright or good" way to treat people? The answer is simple: with dignity. Therefore, I propose the value of *human dignity* for today's debate round.

III. Value: Human Dignity

Philosopher Immanuel Kant argued that "all persons have an inherent value, or dignity, in virtue of their rational autonomy. This value commands a distinct kind of moral respect, which we express by abiding by certain limits in our treatment of others."³ Thus, Kant argued that morality demands

¹ Stevenson, B., "Bryan Stevenson," *Equal Justice Initiative*, accessed May 11, 2026, <https://eji.org/bryan-stevenson/>.

² *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, s.v. "Just," accessed May 11, 2026, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/just>.

³ Debes, R., "Dignity," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2026 Edition)*, accessed May 11, 2026, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2026/entries/dignity/>. (Endnote 1 for full quote)

that all people are treated ‘as an end’ and ‘never merely as a means.’”⁴In other words, with human dignity.

It is not my position as the Negative that retribution lacks any value whatsoever. Rather, my position is that a criminal justice system is only as legitimate as it acts *justly*. To act “justly” is not to adopt a systematic approach that treats people as mere transactional means to “right wrongs,” but rather an approach that endeavors to restore the dignity of every person it deals with as much as possible. Therefore, rehabilitation is more valuable than retribution because it restores human dignity; whereas, retribution destroys it.

IV. Contentions

Contention 1: Rehabilitation Restores Human Dignity

The criminal justice system is an institution that trades value: rights for wrongs, sometimes wrongs for rights, and too often wrongs for wrongs. Historically, this was “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” according to the Code of Hammurabi.⁵ Modernly, money for an eye, jail time for a tooth. However, do any of these transactional means really result in anything being made “right”? Rehabilitation recognizes wrongs are not made right through transactional revenge: the principle of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth merely results in two people being blinded and two people having a lisp. This is because once a wrong has been committed, human dignity has been destroyed for the victim, society, and even the offender. Therefore, a just approach to criminal justice is one that restores the human dignity of offenders, victims, and society, which can only be done through treating people as ends in themselves, worthy of restoration within the community.

Rehabilitation, according to *Encyclopedia Britannica*, is “the idea that the purpose of punishment is to apply treatment and training to the offender so that he is made capable of returning to society and functioning as a law-abiding member of the community.”⁶ Through accountability and transformation, rehabilitation restores human dignity; whereas, retribution destroys it.

Contention 2: Retribution Destroys Human Dignity

Retribution, according to *Justia Legal Dictionary*, is “a form of punishment given to an offender with the aim to repay or seek revenge for the wrongdoing they committed.”⁷ To Russian philosopher Fyodor Dostoevsky, who personally spent time in retributive prisons, “In a word, the right granted

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ King, L.W., trans., *The Code of Hammurabi*, Yale Law School Lillian Goldman Law Library, (2008), accessed May 11, 2026, <https://avalon.law.yale.edu/ancient/hamframe.asp>.

⁶ Bernard, T., et. al., “Punishment,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, (2025), accessed February 12, 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/punishment/Rehabilitation>. (Endnote 2 for full quote)

⁷ *Justia Legal Dictionary*, s.v. “Retribution,” (2026), accessed February 12, 2026, <https://dictionary.justia.com/retribution>.

to a man to inflict corporal punishment on his fellow-men, is one of the plague-spots of our society. It is the means of annihilating all civic spirit.”⁸

What does retribution achieve beyond treating offenders and victims as currency in the transaction that is revenge? Nothing short of a wrong being committed in reaction to another wrong, which leaves the victim’s and offender’s blindness untouched. As philosopher and Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius once said, “The best way of avenging thyself is not to become like the wrong doer.”⁹ Rehabilitation does not act as the wrongdoer, destroying the dignity of others. Instead, as much as possible, rehabilitation restores the dignity of all. Therefore, I remain resolved: It is NOT just for a criminal justice system to value retribution over rehabilitation.

⁸ Dostoyevsky, F., *The House of the Dead*, The Project Gutenberg, accessed May 11, 2026, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/37536/37536-h/37536-h.htm>. (Endnote 3 for full quote)

⁹ Aurelius, M., Long, G., trans., *The Meditations*, The Internet Classics Archive, accessed May 11, 2026, <https://classics.mit.edu/Antoninus/meditations.6.six.html>

Endnotes

Endnote 1 – Kant on Dignity

Debes, R., "Dignity," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2026 Edition), accessed May 11, 2026, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2026/entries/dignity/>

"The early modern concept of dignity originates with Immanuel Kant, who in his 1785 *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, argued that all persons have an inherent value, or dignity, in virtue of their rational autonomy. This value commands a distinct kind of moral respect, which we express by abiding by certain limits in our treatment of others. Thus, Kant argued that we have a categorical duty to treat persons always 'as an end' and 'never merely as a means' (*Groundwork*, 4:429)."¹⁰

Endnote 2 – Definition of Rehabilitation

Bernard, T., et. al., "Punishment," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, (2025), accessed February 12, 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/punishment/Rehabilitation>.

"The most recently formulated theory of punishment is that of rehabilitation—the idea that the purpose of punishment is to apply treatment and training to the offender so that he is made capable of returning to society and functioning as a law-abiding member of the community. Established in legal practice in the 19th century, rehabilitation was viewed as a humane alternative to retribution and deterrence, though it did not necessarily result in an offender receiving a more lenient penalty than he would have received under a retributive or deterrent philosophy. In many cases rehabilitation meant that an offender would be released on probation under some condition; in other cases it meant that he would serve a relatively longer period in custody to undergo treatment or training. One widely used instrument of rehabilitation in the United States was the indeterminate sentence, under which the length of detention was governed by the degree of reform the offender exhibited while incarcerated."

¹⁰ Debes, R., "Dignity," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2026 Edition), accessed May 11, 2026, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2026/entries/dignity/>.

Endnote 4 - Dostoevsky on Corporal Punishment

Dostoyevsky, F., *The House of the Dead*, The Project Gutenberg, accessed May 11, 2026, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/37536/37536-h/37536-h.htm>.

“That the possibility of such license has a contagious effect on the whole of society there is no doubt. A society which looks upon such things with an indifferent eye, is already infected to the marrow. In a word, the right granted to a man to inflict corporal punishment on his fellow-men, is one of the plague-spots of our society. It is the means of annihilating all civic spirit. Such a right contains in germ the elements of inevitable, imminent decomposition.”