# The Imperative of Autonomy, and What Happens to the Testimony When Survival Requires You to Seal It

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## Abstract

This is the third paper in a trilogy on why the prison system persists although the people who pass through it describe it as unacceptable. The first paper ("It Wasn't That Bad") examined the output: the sentence people use to sum up their time inside. The second examined enforcement: the violence that keeps complaints unspoken. This paper examines the interior logic: why a person who has been through the system cooperates with their own silencing. Not because they are forced, and not only because they are afraid, but because admitting it was unacceptable means admitting they were powerless. In an environment that removes most forms of autonomy, the last territory left is the interior self, the part that says "this doesn't reach me." "You can't hurt me if I can't be hurt" is not a performance for others. It is the wall that preserves personhood. On the other side of that wall is the testimony that would show what prison does. Reform depends on making that testimony safe to give.

## 1. You Cannot Understand

You can visit a prison. You can watch a documentary. You can read research papers about recidivism and PTSD and space-per-body-size ratios. You can look at it in the same way you look at something in a museum — you can stand in front of it and think "that seems bad" and read the placard and move to the next exhibit and go home.

You cannot understand.

Understanding is not available from the outside. It is not a conclusion you can reach through information. It is not something that becomes clearer with more data. The distance between knowing about it and knowing it is not a gap that can be bridged by reading. It is a wall.

But if you experience it, you know instantly.

Not "this seems bad." Not "this could be improved." Not "there are arguments on both sides." You know — in your body, the way you know fire is hot, the way you know falling — that this should not be done to anything. Not to a person. Not to an animal. Not to anything.

This knowledge is not an opinion. It is immediate. It is total. It arrives in the first minutes and it never leaves.

## 2. What It Is

Imagine you are taken. Right now. Against your will.

The people taking you act as though they are righteous. They act as though they are good for doing this. They believe it. Their faces say: this is correct, this is justice, this is how it should be.

You are forcibly taken.

Your clothes are taken. There are witnesses — three of them — and they are mean. Not cruel in a dramatic way. Mean. Indifferent. You are a process to them. Your items are taken. Some go missing. You will not get some of them back.

You are told a bunch of confusing things. Rules. Procedures. Expectations. You do not understand most of them. You are not in a state to understand anything. You have just been taken from your life.

You are placed into a small, disgusting space. You cannot do anything. You cannot go anywhere. You cannot be anything. You cannot have anything.

You are kept there.

Until they force you to come out. They force you to another ugly room. A camera is put in your face. People question you about sensitive topics for hours. They do not listen when you speak.

You have never seen any of this. You have never felt any of this. You have never been any of this.

They don't look at you. When they do, it's like you are nothing. You can see it in their eyes. You are not a person to them. You are the thing they process.

You have nothing.

You have to walk on specific spots or you will be restrained. You have to listen or you will be restrained. You cannot look where you want. You cannot touch anything. You cannot be.

You cannot leave.

You remember your mother telling you: if something is wrong, walk away. You cannot walk away. There is nowhere to walk to. The door does not open from your side.

You are kept there. With nothing. Not "very little" — nothing. No mirror. You might feel connected to yourself if you could see your own face. You cannot. No purse. No lip balm. No blanket. No socks. The air conditioning is freezing and there is nothing you can do about it.

Nothing. Nothing. Nothing.

All this, and you're innocent.

## 3. The Knowledge

Every person who goes through this — guilty, innocent, it doesn't matter — acquires the same knowledge in the same way. It is not learned. It arrives. It is not a thought. It is a physical certainty.

This should not be done to anything.

Not "this is suboptimal." Not "this could use reform." Not "the conditions could be improved."

This should not exist. This should not be done to a human being. This should not be done to a dog. This should not be done.

The knowledge is universal. It does not depend on education. It does not depend on politics. It does not depend on what you did or didn't do. It does not depend on whether you "deserve" it. There is no version of deserving that makes this acceptable, because what is happening is not punishment — it is the systematic destruction of personhood, and you know this because you can feel your personhood being destroyed in real time.

Every person who exits the system carries this knowledge.

The system produces thousands of witnesses a day.

Every one of them knows the same thing.

## 4. The Last Territory

Everything has been taken. Movement. Time. Privacy. Clothing. Possessions. Temperature. Light. Sound. Food. When you eat. When you sleep. When you use the toilet. Who you see. Whether you are seen. Whether

you are spoken to. Whether you are listened to. Whether you are looked at like a person.

Everything.

Almost everything.

There is one thing left, and it is the only thing that cannot be physically confiscated: whether it reaches you.

If it reaches you — if you feel the full weight of what is being done to you — then they have everything. Your body AND your interior. Your movements AND your feelings. Your cell AND your self. They own all of it. There is nothing left that is yours.

If it doesn't reach you — if you can build a wall between what is happening and what you feel about what is happening — then there is still a you. There is still a person in there who is not fully owned by the system. There is still something the locked door cannot reach.

"You can't hurt me" is not bravado. It is not a performance for an audience. It is not the masculine toughness described by de Viggiani (2012) or the strategic presentation documented by Ricciardelli et al. (2015) — though it becomes those things when spoken outward.

Before it is any of those things, it is **the last act of autonomy available to a person who has been stripped of every other form of autonomy.**

I cannot control where I am. I cannot control what happens to me. I cannot control what I eat, when I sleep, who I see, whether I am safe. But I can control whether it gets in. I can decide — and this may be the last decision I am allowed to make — that this does not reach me.

You can't hurt me if I can't be hurt.

This is not denial. It is architecture. The person is building something — the only thing they can build — and what they are building is a self that survives by being unreachable.

## 5. The Wall and the Testimony

The wall works. That is the problem.

The wall keeps the person alive inside. It preserves something — a sense of self, a sense of autonomy, a sense of "I am still here and I am still mine." Without the wall, the full weight of the experience is unmediated, and unmediated exposure to the systematic destruction of personhood is — the research is clear on this — psychologically catastrophic. PTSD rates of 4.6x to 10.4x the general population (Baranyi et al., 2018). Post-release mortality 3.5x higher (Binswanger et al., 2007). The wall is not optional. The wall is survival.

But the wall has two sides.

On the inside: the person. Intact. Functional. Surviving. "You can't hurt me."

On the outside: the testimony. Everything they saw. Everything they felt. Everything they know — that immediate, bodily, total knowledge that this should not be done to anything.

The wall keeps the person alive by keeping the testimony sealed. The testimony cannot come out without the wall coming down. And if the wall comes down, the person has to sit with the full, unmediated knowledge that they were powerless — completely, utterly powerless — while something unacceptable was done to them, by people who believed they were right to do it, and nobody stopped it, and nobody was required to ask whether it was justified, and there was no community member reviewing the conditions, and there was no endpoint, and they could not leave, and they could not walk away, and their mother's advice was useless, and they had no socks.

Admitting "it was that bad" is not a statement about prison conditions.

It is an admission that you were subjected to something unacceptable and you could not stop it. That you were powerless in the most total way a person can be powerless. That the wall you built — the last territory, the last thing that was yours — was a survival mechanism, not a truth. That "you can't hurt me" was never true. They could. They did. And you told yourself they didn't because the alternative was the full experience of your own powerlessness.

No one volunteers for that. Not in prison. Not after. Not ever.

## 6. The System's Perfect Defense

This is why the system survives.

Not because of policy. Not because of politics. Not because people don't care. Not because the evidence is insufficient — Norway's 20% recidivism versus 77% is not subtle.

The system survives because it produces witnesses who cannot testify without destroying themselves.

(Applebee & Combe, 2026, "*Constructed Guilt*") documented the output: "it wasn't that bad." The sentence that protects the system.

(Applebee & Combe, 2026, "*The $19 Trillion Solution*") documented the enforcement: if you name the problem, you become the problem. The violence that produces the silence.

This paper documents the interior: the person cannot testify because the wall that seals the testimony is the same wall that preserves their personhood. Testimony requires dismantling the wall. Dismantling the wall requires experiencing the full weight of what was done to them. The full weight of what was done to them is the thing the wall was built to survive.

The system has, through its operation, created a class of witnesses whose testimony is sealed by the very mechanism that kept them alive inside it.

Three layers. Three papers. One output.

"It wasn't that bad. I'd do my time."

## 7. Innocence

Everything in this paper applies to every person who goes through the system. Guilty. Innocent. Somewhere in between. The conditions are the same. The experience is the same. The wall is the same.

But consider what it means to build that wall — to construct an unreachable self, to seal the testimony, to say "you can't hurt me" — when you didn't do anything.

When you were taken from your life for something you did not do. When the people who took you were righteous about it. When the process that followed — the confusing rules, the cameras, the hours of questioning, the eyes that look through you — was applied to someone who should not have been there at all.

The innocent person builds the same wall. They have to. The conditions don't check your charges before they destroy your personhood. The freezing air conditioning doesn't ask whether you're guilty. The absence of a mirror doesn't care about your verdict.

And when they come out — if they come out — they carry the same sealed testimony. "It wasn't that bad." Because admitting it was that bad means admitting that something unacceptable was done to them for no reason by people who believed they were right and nobody stopped it and nobody asked whether it was justified and there was no community representative and there was no endpoint and they were innocent.

That is not a testimony most people can survive giving.

So they don't.

And the system survives another day.

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## 8. What Would Have to Change

Two things would have to change. Not prison conditions — those are downstream. Two structural things that currently exist for laboratory animals and not for human beings:

**1. A layperson — a community member with no institutional affiliation — must be part of every oversight process.**

In Australia, animal ethics committees require a community representative. Prison oversight does not. The system reviews itself. A person who has never been inside the system, who has no professional or financial relationship to it, must be required to witness the conditions and ask: is this acceptable? Would I accept this for myself? For my child?

The layperson is the person who can still see it for what it is — because they haven't been prisonized, they haven't been conditioned, they haven't built the wall. They can still have the reaction that every person has the first time they experience it: this should not be done to anything.

**2. Someone must be required to ask: "Is this suffering justified?"**

Before every rat enters a cage, someone asks this question. They are required to by law. They must document the answer. The answer must be reviewed. It must be defended.

No one asks this question for any prisoner. The question does not exist in the architecture of the system. It is not asked before sentencing. It is not asked during incarceration. It is not asked upon release. At no point in the entire process does any person in any role ask: is this suffering justified?

The question itself — just the asking of it — would change everything. Not because the answer would necessarily be "no." But because the act of asking requires someone to look at the conditions, to see the person in them, and to account for what is being done. The act of asking makes the suffering visible. And visibility is the one thing the system cannot survive.

The wall exists because no one is looking. The testimony is sealed because no one is asking. The system survives because the question is never posed.

A rat gets the question.

A person doesn't.

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