

THE PANOPTICON AS A POTENTIAL THOUGHT EXPERIMENT:  
AN EXPLORATION OF CENTRALIZED  
POWER STRUCTURES

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Nubaira Khan  
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Thesis Approvals:

Nora Jones Ph.D, Thesis Advisor, Center for Urban Bioethics

## ABSTRACT

Jeremy Bentham's panopticon is a theoretical prison that was developed in 1787 as a way to punish and reform people convicted of crime. It involved a circular building with a central guard tower, from which an omnipresent and omniscient warden would constantly surveille the inmates who were kept in solitary confinement. Although the prison was never physically constructed, elements of the panopticon are present in many aspects of our social structure and power systems. This paper explores Bentham's original work, the post-modern responses to it, and present day manifestations of the panopticon through a bioethics lens in order to develop a metaphorical tool that can be used examine and explain how power is systematized and functionalized by those who control it, the effects on those who are subject to it, and how the systems are exploited to the point of dysfunction.

## DEDICATION

Dedicated to Ma, Baba, Nabiha, Mikail, Aisha, Habeebah, and Claire.

Thank you for your support, encouragement, and love.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In 1787, English philosopher Jeremy Bentham first began to describe what he considered to be an ideal prison. The imposing structure, which would be shrouded in secrecy and mystery, was dubbed the panopticon. In a series of letters written over the course of four years, Bentham explained the designs and intended purpose of this theoretically imposing structure, in which he intended to warp reality for its inhabitants and create an omniscient and omnipresent figure, which he called the Inspector, whose power was paramount to God in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The letters were never turned into a formal publication, and did not enter the wider public until the 1970's, but the ideas within them have manifested in political theory, legislative ideology, and even technology development up into the present day. The idea of a panopticon feels intuitive and familiar. It functions on the basis that constant surveillance, which in and of itself is undetectable, instills punishment for rule breaking and misbehavior, and public displays of guilt and atonement will result in a learned behavior that creates a self-policing, captive population isolated from each other and the outside world. Examples of this phenomenon exist in every society because to be a functioning member of a collective group, one must agree to follow rules that curtail individual freedoms in favor of cooperation. In return, the individual receives all the benefits of being a member of that society, whatever they may be.

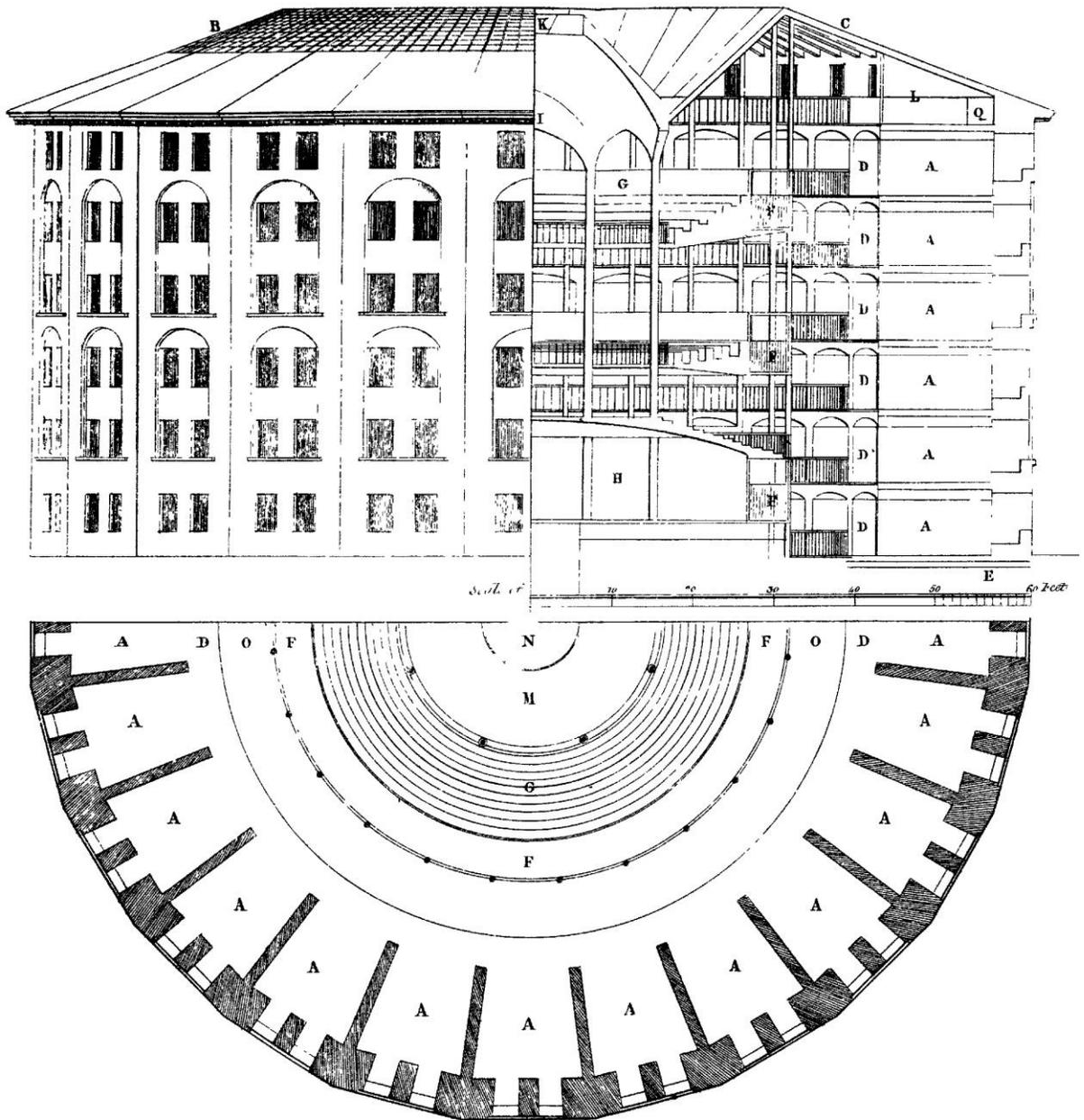
For example, as someone who drives a car, I stop at every stop sign. The sign may not know if I do or don't, and there may not be a police officer standing at every stop sign, but I still stop every time because I know that if I was to be seen breaking that rule, there could be consequences and most likely some form of punishment. This example is simple, but also represents a rule that most would agree is fair and based in common sense for the safety of the general public. Whether something is considered a crime or not, what is considered to be adequate punishment, imprisonment, and forced labor are all important tools in how a state polices and controls its population and enforces its laws.

But what about laws that are unjust? Or when the implementation of those laws unreasonably affects some more than others? Bentham's panopticon, while it never existed beyond his letters, could function as social metaphor through the lenses of bioethics and systems thinking and be utilized as a tool to explore the relationships and systems between people and the power structures they create. These power structures can appear in many different places such as political/government structures, healthcare systems, or economic systems. Using the panopticon to explore these structures can be used to also explore and explain how power is systematized and functionalized by those who control it, the effects on those who are subject to it, and how the systems are sometimes exploited to the point of dysfunction.

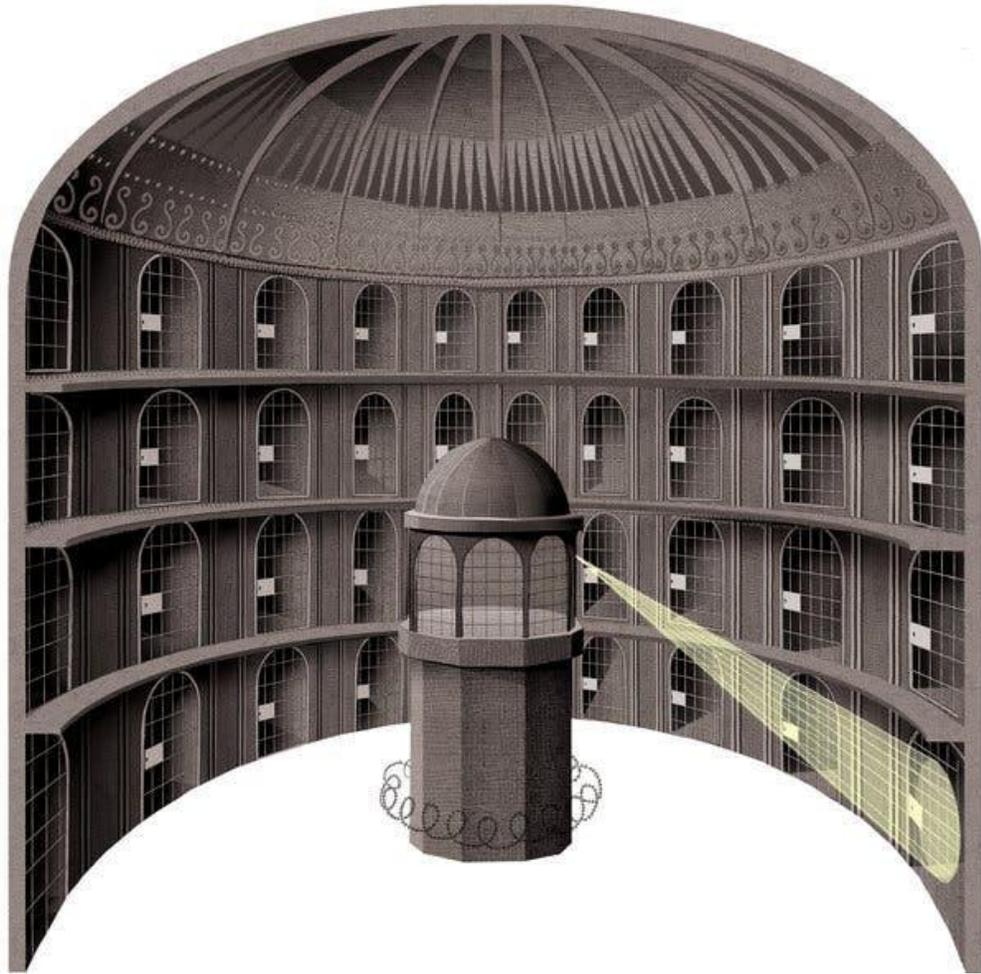
## CHAPTER 2: THE STRUCTURE AND FUNCTION OF THE PANOPTICON

### Physical Structure & Purpose

To use the panopticon as a metaphor and analytical tool, its structure and function must first be understood. The building was described as circular, with cells lining the circumference that were isolated from each other and only visible to the warden of the prison, whom Bentham called the inspector, with a circular tower in the center that cannot be seen into by the inmates (See Figures 1 & 2). The inspector would be housed within the central guard tower, or inspection house, obscuring them from the view of the inmates while also allowing for constant audio communication and visual surveillance, as much as one could surveil in the 1700s without the benefit of modern technology, although Bentham did theorize different techniques that could be used to achieve his desired results, including shadowy silhouettes, tubing, mirrors, and more.



*Fig.1: plan of the panopticon drawn by William Reveley (1791)*



*Fig.2: The Panopticon by Adam Simpson for The New York Times (2013)*

The intended effect of these architectural specifications was that the inmates would never be able to ascertain whether or not they were being actively observed by the inspector, and the inspector would only ever present to the inmates as a constant vague and unchanging silhouette projected from a lantern. This, in turn, would prompt the inmates to self-police their actions and behavior, and they would learn to not break the

rules or misbehave to avoid being punished by the inspector. This sort of learned behavior is the foundation for any societal participation. Children are taught to raise their hands if they want to ask a question in school, say please and thank you, etc. all so that they can navigate their surroundings and interact with other people. However, reforming the convicted person's behavior was not Bentham's intended goal of a prison experience. He did not believe that prison was the place to reform those people who had been convicted of crimes, whether they committed them out of necessity or through inclination. Instead, he believed that prison should only aim to punish the inmates through isolation and labor, and thus deter anyone else from committing criminal acts. Bentham, as a true utilitarian, believed that the acts of a crime and any form of subsequent punishment generated suffering, the former in the victim and the latter in the perpetrator. As such, trying to offset the consequences of a committed crime with any kind of punishment, let alone harsh punishment, would only create more suffering, which was to be avoided at all costs. He accepted that crime deserved punishment, and advocated for the use of the least harsh punishment that could be feasibly meted out, which was the loss of liberty and the imposition of forced labor. Through his methods of isolation and surveillance, Bentham wanted the guilty person to experience complete isolation from his fellow inmates and even the community in general. The only interaction the inmate would have is with the disembodied voice of the inspector, who appears to be omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. Furthermore, the prisoner interacts solely with the warden during their incarceration, creating a unique relationship and power dynamic that might have affected the mental health and stability of the prisoner although Bentham did not expand on that particular area.

## Methods of Control

Surveillance is the cornerstone of the panopticon. It is important to note that the average British citizen in the 18<sup>th</sup> century would not have the same expectation of surveillance from the state as, for example, a 21<sup>st</sup> century U.S. citizen. Modern day technology, the pervasiveness of online data-mining, and government agencies such as the CIA and NSA historically establish a base level of surveillance that most people would not be surprised by. But, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the power of constant observation and knowledge of the hidden and unknown existed only within God. The panopticon, in Bentham's mind, generated two distinct realities that would allow it to function as intended. One was for the prisoner experiencing omnipresence and omniscience that, at the time of Bentham's original letters, would have only been possible by the monotheistic god of Christianity. The second was for the members of the community, who were meant to view the panopticon as a source of social and moral direction. They were meant to watch public displays of guilt, punishment, and atonement, or at least view them from a theoretical or instructional perspective, so that they would be deterred from committing similar crimes. This is a crucial point on which Bentham hinges the function of the panopticon. There is a marked difference between the modern and the 18<sup>th</sup> century citizen in any country. The expectation, experience, pervasiveness, and weaponization of surveillance are all relatively recent developments in human history.

Labor is another crucial facet of the panopticon. Bentham outlines that the prisoner's main job while incarcerated would be to labor in any manner of their choosing, for which they would be paid (less than a free person would for the same work, but paid

nonetheless), and through their diligent work and good behavior, would be able to spend the majority of their prison sentence at relative ease while still isolated and imprisoned. The day-to-day running of the prison and the associated overhead costs would be contracted out to the person who had the greatest vested interest in the successful operation of the panopticon. These contractors would be able to make decisions about the treatment of prisoners, outsourcing the labor and profit generated by the inmates, and other managerial decisions. While Bentham did not specify if there was any intention or necessity for the panopticon to generate profit outside of the over-head costs of maintenance and the basic needs of the inmates, for the sake of this analysis, I will assume that the panopticon functions in the capacity of a modern day for-profit prison, such as those built and run by contractors paid by state or federal governments in the U.S..

Some degree of public accessibility was also a part of Bentham's design with the intention that inmates and their punishment could be viewed by the non-incarcerated members of the community, although they would not be able to interact or be aware that they were being observed in this manner as well. Bentham even insisted that the panopticon had a duty to have very public displays of guilt, punishment, and atonement. He suggested that, while the actual punishments did not necessarily have to be harsh or extreme, the displays could be sensationalized and embellished so that they had the greatest effect on the community members watching them. It's unclear from Bentham's letters to what extent he intended for the panopticon to be accessible; whether it was just the displays, or a complete and free access while also maintaining the isolation and

observation of the inmates. This theatrical performance of public atonement and the ability to view prisoners within the panopticon would serve, in Bentham's opinion, as the most effective crime deterrent, more so than any real or overly harsh punishment, and definitely more than any kind of reformatory programs within the prison (Bentham 1843).

The "theatricalization" of crime, punishment, and atonement has existed in the narrative form for centuries. For example, many of the Greek tragedies have elements of crimes being committed, whether intentionally or otherwise, receiving punishment for said crimes, and either dying as a result of spending the rest of one's life atoning. The chorus of the Greek tragedies serves as the voice of the gods and the voice of reason, there to instruct the viewers on the lessons to be learned from these plays. This may be the same technique that Bentham wanted to use in his guilt and atonement displays from the panopticon, and perhaps he believed that they would be more effective than any public execution, stock, or pillory (Bozovic 1995).

### Historical Context

To further understand the framework of the panopticon, it is important to note the time period and the relevant sociopolitical factors relevant to the subject. Jeremy Bentham was regarded in his own time as a radical political theorist. He advocated for the abolition of slavery, welfarism of both the state and economy, equal rights for women, and freedom of speech. His philosophies led to sweeping reforms of prisons, schools, courts, and Parliament. While Bentham was never able to create a panopticon, he did advocate for the creation of work houses as a way for the government to "manage

paupers” in what was referred to as “poor laws,” (Bentham 1791) which would become popularized in Victorian England and satirized by Charles Dickens. These work houses were designed to contain paupers, or any person who was poor, outcast, disabled, deemed mentally unfit, etc., and their children in such a way that they and their future generations would be put to work for the state doing any kind of labor in exchange for food and housing indefinitely. In fact, Bentham’s scheme was to indoctrinate the children in these work houses so that they would never want to leave, thus turning their prison into Utopia (Bentham 1843). Ironically, Bentham’s own individualistic political ideologies will fade from popularity by the 1800’s in favor of centralized power structures

Globally, the empires of Europe were growing, experiencing social and political shifts. By the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, Britain had lost its colonies in North America and Senegal, slavery was being outlawed in their remaining ones while still spreading exponentially throughout the entirety of the Americas. The first group of convicted criminals was being sent to Botany Bay in Australia in 1787. Britain, France, Spain, and the Dutch are starting to further colonize and cut up territories in Africa, Asia, and Oceania. The East India Company has been functioning for over 100 years.

Historians refer to 1660-1837 as “The Long Eighteenth Century,” which is characterized by the expansion of a centralized administrative state as an information-gathering entity, utilizing its resources to gather intelligence on political and religious dissenters and other perceived enemies of the state (Devereaux 2010). These emerging systems become the foundation for the Great British Empire, under which 23% of the

world's population will fall. These are the early stages of Britain's steady ascent towards becoming the largest empire in history. The concepts of race, capital, industrialization, globalization, and the nation state will all emerge out of the European continent during this long century. These major social and political forces will disseminate to other enterprising nations, who will adopt and perpetuate them well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century (MacDonagh 1958).

## CHAPTER 3: THE PHILOSOPHY OF PENAL SYSTEMS

### Foucault and the History of Crime and Punishment

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the panopticon became a philosophical tool that was most famously explored by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punishment* (1975). Foucault argues that penal styles are dependent on the role and function of power in society and that the punishment for crimes will reflect the relationship between those who exercise power and those who are subject to it, and works within an economy of suspended rights in the present day, whereas in the past practices like torture as an interrogation technique and punishment, and public executions were the most common punitive. Foucault tracks this power-penal relationship from medieval European monarchies up until the 20<sup>th</sup> century in both Europe and North America, exploring the changes in method and medium. The first major shift in punitive measures was the departure from public physical punishment. Torture techniques like drawing and quartering, the rack, hanging, etc. were excessive affirmations of the power of the sovereign over the subjects because breaking the law was viewed as a direct violation to the body of the sovereign, not just the community. The sovereign had two arms to enforce his will and power over the people: the law and the military. With them, he was able to act out gruesome punishments without repercussion, although there were risks. Ultimately, public executions and torture were too volatile and were coming to be considered excessive tyrannical shows of force. These and other factors lead to the reforms that established penal systems that were self-contained and functioned to uphold the systems of power that create them by adopting the same level of standardization and bureaucracy as the

governments that built them. Crime also changed as populations, standard of living, and personal wealth all increased. The need for greater policing and security arose and property theft and violation were more heavily criminalized than before (Foucault 2012).

As regimes shifted to bureaucratic centralized systems of power, bodies shifted their locus of value that made traditional physical torture and punishment obsolete and created new incentives for imprisonment and forced labor. The soul that used to only exist within the realm of religion; had moved more firmly into the realm of the state, and this new locus was punished only through imprisonment. Between the government and penal reforms of Europe and North America in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a new type of citizen was developed: Foucault calls them the *homo oeconomicus* or a body politique: a cog in the machine of the empire, crucial to its function and success, naturally law abiding, and the main medium upon which punishment is meted out (Foucault 1975). In these systems, punishments were carefully calculated and codified based on the crime by the law, in theory. Of course, even in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were variations and inequities in the application of the law for those who were upper class or wealthy, and in the United States, the institution of slavery created a whole new body, separate from the body politique, on which an alternate and extremely harsh set of laws were applied. Imprisonment became the most prevalent form of punishment for the body politique because it could be easily and economically applied. It systematized and centralized the function of these newly formed jail houses into what would evolve into the modern day prison, characterized by its hierarchical structure of prisoners, cells, use of solitary confinement, forced labor, the collection of information on prisoners from surveillance,

and seclusion from the public. All of which resemble Bentham's original design for the panopticon. Foucault states that the emergence and ubiquity of prisons marks "the institutionalization of the power to punish," but questions whether the prison will evolve into an overt social structure or a hidden and enclosed reformatory (Foucault 2012).

Foucault goes on to explain how these newly formed prisons and their subsequent iterations would use a variety of techniques to control the population they held within, as well as influence the population outside. These prisons relied on a strictly enforced hierarchical system of ranking that codified the prisoner. Moreover, this centralized power lends itself to and benefits from hierarchy of any kind (e.g. rank, race, economic) because the codification allows for granularity encoded within a visual language of identification. The ranks had their visual cues that allowed for value and moral judgements to be made naturally. The discipline associated with these ranks allowed for complete control and a docile mass of bodies that could be put to a task with order and efficacy. Those who created the ranks and controlled them existed well outside the ranking system in a seat of distant and unknowable power. Finally, the centralized power structure depended heavily on surveillance and knowledge to establish and maintain control. For Foucault, knowledge is a function of power and power is an action to be done onto others; being subject to power means being known (voluntarily or involuntarily). In these new prisons, inmates were observed and their character, motivations, and behavior were observed and documented for the benefit of the institution and society. Observations could establish good behavior; which could lead to early release, or an inclination to laziness and vagrancy; which was a mark that an

individual carried with them even after being released. The intimate knowledge gained from observation allowed the power structure to “individualize” a person for the purpose of control. Individualization derived from any deviation from normal, healthy, productive, and law-aiding. With these techniques, an institution of power was established that had two distinct participants: those exercising power, and those upon whom it is exercised. Between these two groups a “physics of power” was developed, a natural and normalized reactivity that was innate to the system (Foucault 1975). Citizens and prisoners alike could expect the same predictable response from the systems of power, and believe it in the same way one believes boiling water creates steam. This was Bentham’s goal for the panopticon: a structure in which a new nature, a new reality, could be formed that would encapsulate the prisoner, use his body, reform his spirit, and release him into society as an ideal specimen of *homo oeconomicus*. It makes no differentiation between power derived from the people and power derived from the bodies of people. This process could be repeated as many times as possible until the desired results were achieved, and could be applied on a scale that would build global empires.

### Systems of Power & Their Penal Structures

Foucault’s connections between systems of power and the penal structures they create are the basis of the panopticon as a metaphor and explorative tool for centralized power structures. The panopticon is an indicator of certain values and understandings of the relationship between people and the powers that act upon them through their social systems because it embodies the nature of centralized power so well. In a strictly

centralized power structure like the panopticon, hierarchy and rank in turn refer to role, purpose, and value. This explains why even though Bentham never published his writings formally or built the panopticon, the structure and its principles can be seen in institutions all over the Global North. The ideas and beliefs that lead to the panopticon were widespread and informed the construction and function of schools and factories as well as prisons. Examples of this can be seen in history as well as modern day. In the Victorian era, the same principles of the body politique; that a citizen should be law abiding, industrious, and disciplined if they wanted a decent quality of life, lead to the creation of work houses. People who were poor, uneducated, unemployed, disabled, ill, or otherwise socially stigmatized were sent to the workhouse as an intermediate location in which they could receive food, shelter, and temporary employment, as well as some degree of medical care and social services. However, to prevent this exploitation of this institution, the workhouses were harsh, and psychologically abusive, and anyone who admitted themselves or their families risked losing parental rights over children, permanent relocation and resettlement, and deportation. The workhouse used the same tactics as the panopticon to ensure order, productivity, and reformation of individuals (Chu 2021). The harshness of the Victorian Poor Laws and subsequent workhouses reflected the societal attitude towards the poor, disabled, and unemployed, and justified their treatment (Britannica 2020).



*Fig.3: Stateville Prison, F House, Illinois, USA, by Doug DuBois & Jim Goldberg (2002)*

## CHAPTER 4: THE PANOPTICON IN THE MODERN WORLD

Multiple institutions in the U.S. share similarities with the panopticon, none more so than the prison industrial complex (see Figure 3). While Bentham viewed deterrence as the primary purpose of the panopticon (Bentham 1843), reform was the main reason for the widespread adoption of imprisonment as the primary penalty for crime. Undeniably, the U.S., which has the highest rate of incarceration per capita in the world as of 2021 with almost 2.1 million people in prison, majority of whom are Black and Brown men (Currie 2013) has a distinctive system of population control, enforcement of laws, and punishment that has created this massive prison population. Therefore, the relationships between the community, law enforcement agencies, incarcerated peoples, and the state are equally unique and reflected in the institutions they create. The idea that people can be reformed in prison has existed in the U.S. since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as exemplified by Philadelphia's Walnut Street Prison and Eastern State Penitentiary, which greatly resembled the panopticon when they were first built and working. But research shows that incarceration and labor, when used as punishment, are not very effective as methods of behavioral reform or as social deterrents to criminal behavior, which is reflected recidivism rate of 83% within nine years of their arrest (Zgoba 2020). It is also well documented that incarceration does little to address the socioeconomic pressures that drive people towards illicit means of earning income, which are criminalized and severely punished (Apel 2016) (Schwartz-Soicher et al 2011) (Van de Rakt et al 2009) (Morenoff & Harding 2014).

So while prison does very little to either deter crime or reform people who commit them, it does uphold and empower the hierarchies created by the institutions of power to maintain a docile population that can then be moved *en mass* to production and labor. Foucault describes the biological nature of these types of institutions that, on one hand, create isolated, cell-like individuals, but work in tandem within the well-defined borders of an institutional structure (Foucault 2012). These bodies, once acclimated to the system, can be used to produce goods (Misrahi 1995), fight wildfires (Feldman 2020), and even replace a previously enslaved workforce (Browne 2007). Foucault mentions an important shift in the way governing bodies deliver punishment to those convicted of crimes. He specifies that as torture and physical punishments were phased out of penal systems, the physical body was no longer the focus of those punishments. Instead, the “soul” or mind of the person is now the recipient of punishment. Incarceration removes physical liberties and some efforts are made to decrease the mistreatment and abuse that existed in prisons in the past, but a person’s autonomy and agency are revoked. Punishment in modern prisons does involve a lot more isolation and surveillance than in previous decades. If a single case study could be used to exemplify the use of imprisonment and isolation in the modern U.S. prison system, it would be the case of Kalief Browder, who was held at Rikers Island without trial, and certainly without conviction, between 2010 and 2013 for allegedly stealing a backpack (Gonnerman 2014). During that time, he spent more than 17 months in solitary confinement. Mr. Browder wrote about his treatment and its effects on his mental and physical health before dying of suicide in 2015 at the age of 22. Before he died, he wrote that being in jail had robbed him of his happiness (Augustine 2019). Although Bentham does not discuss the psychological and physiological effects of

solitary confinement, its effects on the mental stability and wellbeing of prisoners is being studied and documented, and so far, the results indicate that the effects are devastating and long-lasting.

If a panopticon were to be constructed exactly from Bentham's original design in the modern age, technology would simplify the entire process of surveillance and isolation, as well as the broadcasting of punishment to those not incarcerated in the panopticon. Audiovisual surveillance techniques have become ubiquitous in present day social settings, used as tools for public safety and security as well as to gather intelligence. There is almost an assumption of surveillance in the modern age that did not exist in the same way in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Bentham tried to construct the reality of a god-like, omnipresent, and omniscient warden that, prior to being imprisoned in the panopticon, a person would not expect to experience outside the realm of deities and religion. In contrast, the average internet user in the 21<sup>st</sup> century agrees to be surveilled and monitored every time they open an app on their phone (Monahan 2006). As of 2021, 59.5% of the global population is an active internet user, and of those users, 92.6% access the internet with a mobile device (Johnson 2021). Internet activity is tracked, monitored, and collected by private corporations globally for advertisement and data-mining (Niesz 2020), Edward Snowden exposed the National Security Agency's surveillance program in 2013 (Ray 2021), and post-9/11 global security measures have set a precedent for the surveillance and collection of private data, whether acquired voluntarily or otherwise (Rasmussen 2002). It would not be unfair to assume that the average person accepts that an app like Facebook is watching their activity and creating accurate and predictive

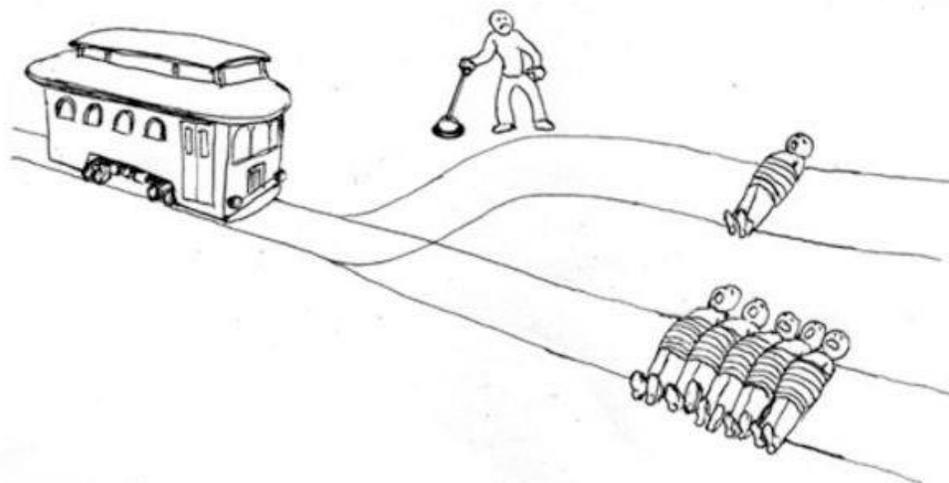
profiles on their behavior. With little regulation and oversight, personal information has become a lucrative commodity, and now a person does not need to even reside within a panopticon to be surveilled in the same way.

## CHAPTER 5: THE PANOPTICON AS A THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

### Purpose of a Thought Experiment

So while the panopticon was never actually built and never functioned as a prison, school, workhouse, hospital, or any other thing that Bentham suggested it could be used for, throughout European and North American history, iterations of the panopticon have arisen and been utilized for just as wide a range of reasons as Bentham could have imagined. Corporate structures, education systems, public service institutions, you name it; all have some elements of discipline and surveillance in a centralized power structure that relies on isolation and imprisonment as tools to control a population. The reasons can vary, but the power dynamics share patterns and functions. There are those within the central tower who are tasked with surveilling, disciplining, and documenting the inmates, and then there are those in the cells, who must obey, conform, and produce. However, considering the nature of the panopticon as an institution that is meant to serve a purpose and a community, it must be noted that the source of power that creates the panopticon cannot exist within it. Those who hold the power to make laws, charge individuals, and imprison them as punishment, according to Bentham and Foucault, must distance themselves as much as possible from the system itself. For Bentham, the all-seeing, all-knowing warden was appointed to his position (Bentham 1843), and per Foucault, distance between the one who sentences and the punitive force is necessary to prevent resentment and retaliation (Foucault 1975). This system of control is efficient and effective, leading to the creation of human atrocities and global empires. The panopticon has manifested in our institutions so readily because it is a reflection of the power

dynamics at work in society, which makes it an ideal tool to explore those same institutions and dynamics. It gives a metaphoric language and context, much like the Trolley Problem (Bizzaro 2020) (see Figure 4), does in ethics, to examine different positions within the system, identify crucial points, and theorize potential dysfunction. Dysfunction in centralized power structures due to exploitation, extreme bureaucracy, and unfair implementation is well documented and has led to the deaths of innocent people like Kalief Browder, and examining these structures can lead to greater awareness of injustice and the identification of leverage points that can be used to combat systemic inequities.



*Fig. 4: a diagram of The Trolley Problem developed by Philippa Foot in 1967*

## Future Areas of Exploration

It would be valuable to better understand what is to be gained from systems like the panopticon, who stands to benefit, and at what cost. What happens when the guard tower is actually empty and inmates are not punished for breaking the rules? How does internalized awareness of authority manifest itself? How long would it take to notice dysfunction at the various levels within the panopticon? If the panopticon were to be developed into a thought experiment, such as the Trolley Problem or Mary the Color Scientist (Jackson 1982), these questions could be explored and inform the way that people view systems of crime and punishment, education, healthcare, and government. In this panopticon thought experiment, there are multiple perspectives that could be explored, and for the sake simplicity, it can be assumed that the panopticon has all the advantages of modern technology to aid in its function, from cameras and microphones, to theoretical devices that do not exist yet but allow for the omnipresent surveillance to be accomplished without second thought or loop hole. First, from within the panopticon there are the prisoners and the warden, and their relationship. The prisoner is isolated from his fellow inmates and only interacts with the presence or idea of the warden, and there may even be some form of verbal communication, although it would be unnecessary if the prisoners were on a tight and strictly enforced schedule, which could be indicated by a bell. They are expected to follow the rules without prompting, complete their work as demanded, and are aware of the constant surveillance they are under, both audio and visual. There is no place to hide themselves or any objects within the cell, and no way of knowing about or communicating with other prisoners. Breaking the rules, attempting to hide or escape, any deviation from the daily schedule or work is severely

punished. Their entire universe has been narrowed to their cell; their purpose has been strictly defined, and they are ruled by their omniscient warden. The intended effect is for the inmate to internalize the awareness of and deference to authority, whether it is seen or unseen. There may not be constant visual signs that they are under a large and powerful thumb (e.g. a “Smile, You’re on Camera” sign), but the pressure is undeniably felt. The inmate has lost all right to bodily autonomy or agency, and to some extent even the solitude of their mind has been violated. There is isolation, and yet no privacy. How does a person survive in this state? What happens to their mind, and how long do the effects last? Would it be effective in changing their behavior so as to prevent any future crime? How does this person return to society? The original panopticon has a paternalistic view of those whom they consider to be poor, vagrant, criminals; that their minds were simple and malleable enough to influence and then return back into society as perfect specimens of the *homo oeconomicus*. What assumptions of the inmate does this theoretical panopticon work under? Are they also meant to emerge as law abiding, industrious, and deferent citizens? What were they before? All of these ideas, if they were explored would provide insight into how a person views a convicted criminal, the purpose or incarceration, the effects of isolation, the efficacy of modern surveillance and the technology associated with it, and more. For the sake of the experiment, I think it would be better to not take on the perspective of the warden, to maintain the “seeing yet unseen” effect. However, it would be interesting to consider whether a single person or a team of correctional officers were to occupy the central guard tower, the operations necessary to maintain the air of isolation and separation between inmates, and also fulfill necessary tasks like providing food, clothing, work tools, medical care, etc. On a larger scale, the

thought experiment could also look at the relationship between the community and the panopticon could also be examined.

As a metaphorical tool, the panopticon acts as a framework for the State which can be generally defined as a centralized political organization that imposes and enforces rules over a population within a territory (Cudworth et al. 2007). The State, as a political entity, also holds the monopoly in the legitimate use of violence, as mentioned previously. In some ways, anyone who wishes to live and participate in a society, obey laws, work to provide for themselves and their dependents, exists within some form of a panopticon. The central guard tower can take the place of state or federal governments and its occupants can be anywhere on the spectrum between elected officials or dynastic dictators. The key difference in this case is the symbiotic relationship between those in the cells and those in the tower. There are benefits associated with living in an organized group of any size: safety, security, shared resources and infrastructure, and laws that are enforced to protect the mutual interests of both the group and individuals. The State provides these benefits, in exchange for any combination of obedience to rules and laws, taxes, physical labor, or service. It can use violence to enforce its rules and punish rule breakers without fear of retaliation. The people that occupy the guard tower have the right to use that violence on those in the cells. The early stages of this type of society would require diligent surveillance, quick enforcement, and consistent punishment to establish a functioning system. Once everyone had learned and internalized the rules and systems, it would probably be relatively simple to keep up. However, if the people in the guard tower become lax in their duties or overly violent, what would dissent and

dysfunction in the panopticon look like? If the guard tower was actually empty, how long would it take for people in the cells to notice? How easy would it be to oust the guards and replace them with new people? Does the structure present an opportunity for exploitation? How are benefits distributed; do people within the guard tower live differently to those in the cells? Are the consequential benefits to holding that position? These questions would allow us to investigate the systems of distributive and social justice, the duties and ethics of care of those holding power, whether or not there is solidarity between those in the people in the tower and those in the cells, and how autonomy and agency are curtailed for utilitarian benefits of the State. The panopticon thought experiment simplifies the relationships and structures of the action of power, and can act as a gateway to deeper ethical and philosophical concepts. These ideas are worth teaching, learning, and exploring because we live in a society with inequity and injustice and if we are able to better understand the mechanics of power at both the systemic and interpersonal level, it would create a introductory understanding that informs how we construct and reform our social, economic, and political systems.

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