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Philosophy in Prisons:

Opening Minds and Broadening Perspectives through philosophical dialogue

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This paper discusses the implementation and outcomes of delivering 'An Introduction to Philosophy' class in HMP Grendon, Oxfordshire. Part of a wider investigation into the relevance of philosophical education to the lives of prisoners, this research constitutes a systematic investigation into philosophical education in prisons. In this paper I discuss the role of philosophy in broadening perspectives of prisoners arguing that, by engaging participants in philosophical dialogue, prisoners are given the opportunity to explore their morals and opinions in a safe, non-adversarial environment. I conclude that engaging in philosophical conversation leads participants to a better understanding of themselves; they are more open to hearing others views and more willing to interrogate their own. Furthermore, by starting from the point of a person in society, as opposed to an offender with deficits to be addressed, philosophical dialogue complements the therapeutic work of Grendon, and allows the individual to see themselves, and their place in the world, from a different perspective.

This paper focuses on philosophy education based on the principles of a Socratic dialogue.¹ Such an approach involves establishing a 'Community of Philosophical Inquiry' (CoPI) which, in practice, is a group of individuals who discuss philosophical questions in an exploratory, non-adversarial manner.² A facilitator begins the session by presenting a stimulus³ which can be based around a particular topic (e.g. a 'just' society, personal identity), a specific philosopher (e.g. Kant, Socrates, Descartes) or a school of philosophy (e.g. the Stoics, utilitarianism). The facilitator acts as one of the members of the community whilst also guiding conversation and maintaining focus. The aim of the philosophy sessions is to get participants thinking and talking about questions

that they may never have considered or, if they have, may never have discussed in a structured environment.

Philosophy '*as an activity...is a way of think[ing] about certain sorts of questions.*' (Warburton 2004). It is about investigating the 'big questions' of truth, reason, morality and the good life; questions that people naturally wonder about in their everyday lives.⁴ Engaging in philosophical thinking encourages processing of thoughts⁵ with '*the purpose of discussion [being] not to get agreement...but to let the discussion of the issues spur you on to thinking about them for yourself.*'⁶ Some have used philosophy to help them cope in extreme circumstances (see for example, Boethius' *Consolations of Philosophy*)⁷ whilst others have drawn on it as an aid to living a more fulfilled and happy life (see Jules Evans, *Philosophy for Life*).⁸

This paper discusses some of the findings of an exploratory piece of research that involved delivery of a 12-week philosophy course in HMP Grendon. In total, twelve participants completed the course and engaged in the research. I interviewed all twelve participants before and after participation and they provided written feedback throughout delivery. The aim of the research was to investigate the role philosophy education might be able to play in the lives of prisoners and within a prison regime. To do this I both delivered the course and undertook the research, drawing upon my own experience and observations (recorded in fieldwork notes) as well as the feedback and interview data provided by the participants.

The research presented here is part of a wider investigation into philosophy in prisons. It builds on pilot work conducted in Low Moss Prison, Glasgow⁹ and HMP High Down, Surrey.¹⁰ The final stage of the research involved delivering the course in HMP Full Sutton, York. Although analysis is in the early stages, findings from Full Sutton are touched upon towards the end of this paper.

1. Barrow, W. (2010) Dialogic, participation and the potential for Philosophy for Children. *Thinking Skills and Creativity*. 5; pp.61-69.
2. Lien, C. (2007) Making Sense of Evaluation of P4C. *Thinking: The Journal of Philosophy for Children*. 17; pp. 36-48.
3. Lipman, M., Sharp, A. M., & Oscanyan, F. S. (1980) *Philosophy in the Classroom*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
4. Blackburn, S. (1999) *Think: A compelling introduction to philosophy*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
5. Hospers, J. (1990) *An introduction to philosophical analysis*. (3rd edn). London: Routledge.
6. p.6 *Ibid*.
7. Boethius A, M. S. (6th century/trans.1897) *Consolations of Philosophy*, trans. H. R. James, London: E. Stock.
8. Evans, J., (2013) *Philosophy for Life And Other Dangerous Situations*. Ebury publishing, Random House.
9. Szifris, K. (2013, unpublished) *Philosophy in Low Moss Prison: Evaluating the impact and relevance of teaching philosophy in prisons*, report to New College North Lanarkshire and Scottish Prison Service.
10. Szifris, K. (2011, unpublished) *Evaluating the benefits of providing a forum for philosophical inquiry*. MPhil Dissertation.

The data from Grendon and Full Sutton will comprise the bulk of my PhD work, supervised and supported by Professor Alison Lieblich.¹¹

This paper explains the research conducted at HMP Grendon, and the relevance of philosophy to prisoners engaged in various kinds of extensive therapy. The following section draws in the similarities and differences between therapeutic dialogue and philosophical dialogue, and also the consequent impact of the classes on the participants as they describe it for themselves. Crucially, I argue that providing philosophical dialogue in a therapeutic environment serves to engage participants in Socratic dialogue from a different perspective to that which therapy involves. Providing this alternative way of thinking about issues such as morality, personal identity and society serves to open minds and broaden perspectives.

All quotes provided are from participants of a philosophy course I delivered to prisoners at HMP Grendon between September and December 2014. Real names are substituted for pseudonyms to protect participants' anonymity and confidentiality. All participants were informed of the research and given clear guidance on use of data and findings and their right to withdraw at any point.

Philosophy in Grendon

Participants stated that philosophy '*fits in well with the ethos of what we are trying to do here*' (Charlie, Grendon). The overarching aim of a therapeutic community (TC) is to provide an environment in which individuals are able to '*explore and challenge one another's behaviour*'.¹² In Grendon, members of the community engage in weekly whole-community meetings and regular small-group therapy sessions where they are subject to methods of Socratic questioning as part of their therapy.¹³ As with Philosophy, this involves '*co-operative exploration*'¹⁴ via systematic questioning in order to facilitate independent thinking. As such, it was a relatively straightforward process to establish a CoPI in Grendon (especially when

comparing it to the difficulties of maintaining positive, non-adversarial dialogue amongst mainstream prisoners in Full Sutton). Participants were skilled in group dialogue, willing and able to question each other and disagree, and were practiced in expressing themselves. Due to the therapeutic process, participants were '*very used to getting in touch with personal issues, with their past, with their actions, why they behave the way they do.*' (Tom, Grendon). These factors served as a good foundation in the skills required to engage in philosophical dialogue.

However, a key distinction between therapy and philosophy is the focus of the dialogue. Therapy often '*entails the exploration and expression of painful material and disturbing emotions*'.¹⁵ In contrast, philosophical discussions were abstract and centred around the ideas of a particular philosopher or philosophy. Participants understood that the purpose of the sessions was primarily '*to exercise your brain*' (Samir, feedback form) and '*to discuss theories and perceptions*' (Charlie, feedback form). This meant the atmosphere in a philosophical dialogue was 'light' in comparison to that of a therapy session where the focus for participants is often on *their past, their crimes and their problems*.

This relates to the second key distinction, the purpose of engaging in philosophical dialogue. In therapy, the purpose is to address participants' criminogenic needs¹⁶ by helping them to understand themselves and their personal relationships with others.¹⁷ As such, in therapy, the fact that participants are in prison underpins the dialogue; although the discussions may not always focus on criminal behaviours, there is an underlying understanding that the aim of therapy is to reduce criminal tendencies. As a result, therapy starts from the standpoint of helping an offender with criminogenic tendencies and anti-social behaviours that require addressing. In philosophy, participants enter the dialogue as people, members of

Crucially, I argue that providing philosophical dialogue in a therapeutic environment serves to engage participants in Socratic dialogue from a different perspective to that which therapy involves.

11. Funded by the Economic Social Research Council UK.
12. Shuker, R. & Shine, J., (2010) The role of therapeutic communities in forensic settings: developments, research and adaptations in Harvey, J. & Smedley, K. (eds.) *Psychological Therapy in Prisons and Other Secure Settings*, Willan: Abingdon.
13. Kazantzis, N., Fairburn, C. G., Padesky, C. A., Reinecke, M. & Teesson, M. (2014) Unresolved issues regarding research and practice of a Cognitive Behavioural Therapy: The case of guided discovery using Socratic questioning. *Behaviour Change*. 31, pp. 1-17.
14. p. 67, Overholser, J. C. (1993). 'Elements of the Socratic Method: I Systematic Questioning' *Psychotherapy*. 30:1, pp. 67-74.
15. p. 48, Greenwood, L. (2001). Psychotherapy in prison: the ultimate container? in Saunders, J. W. (eds.) *Life within hidden walls: psychotherapy in prisons*. London: H. Karnac (books) Ltd.
16. Shuker, R. & Shine, J., (2010) The role of therapeutic communities in forensic settings: developments, research and adaptations in Harvey, J. & Smedley, K. (eds.) *Psychological Therapy in Prisons and Other Secure Settings*. Abingdon: Willan.
17. Genders, E. & Player, E. (1995). *Grendon: A study of a therapeutic prison*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

society ready and willing to discuss what that means to them. By starting from this different perspective, participants are able to reflect on themselves as 'whole' persons without needing to reflect directly or exclusively on their offending behaviour.

This subtle distinction turned out to be of key importance in this research. To be clear, I am arguing that philosophy could act *alongside* therapy. Throughout the research, participants were unambiguous in stating that the extensive and long-term therapeutic process was the primary influence in their lives at the point of the research. However, in coming from a different perspective and focusing on the general rather than the personal, philosophy offered a distinct way of thinking about the world that participants felt complemented the therapeutic process. The following section expands on this point and discusses how philosophical dialogue might achieve this.

Broadening minds and developing perspectives

...the philosophical point of view is to stay open minded, to look at both ends of an argument, to look at both sides of a coin and try and work out what is the best outcome, if there is a best outcome.

(Charlie, Grendon)

'[Philosophy is] looking at why I'm thinking the way I am and being able to realise that I am able to change me mind.' (Phil, Grendon)

During post-participation interviews, participants referred to 'becoming more flexible in the way I think' (Samir, Grendon), 'opening my eyes' (Phil, Grendon) and 'thinking more openly' (Michael, Grendon). Here 'being open-minded' refers to a mindset in which the individual is prepared to have their views challenged, is able to defend their own position without animosity and is willing to understand and consider other perspectives previously discounted or unconsidered. In practice, this means being open to new ideas and willing to change your mind, being willing to listen to other people's point of view, and taking account of the society/community in which you live.

Relevant to this, participants learned that 'there are a lot of options to things rather than just one solution; there are many dimensions or facets' (Charlie, Grendon). Participants developed an understanding of complex issues and became confident in their abilities to tackle them;

When we actually discussed it, although I realised how complex it is, at the same time I realised you could get your head round it in a way. (Samir Grendon).

Exposed to a variety of opinions, participants learned the value of considering different points of view. They recognised that the purpose of the dialogue was to '*...try and build on other people's arguments...instead of dismissing theirs, it's about seeing what they're saying and seeing if I can add to it.*' (Michael, Grendon). As a result, participants become more aware of their influence on society in a broad sense;

...if [philosophy] broadens people's thinking, then people might be able to understand their behaviour; how they interact with society...to be aware more.

Philosophical discussion allows participants to engage in dialogue on topics that are of interest to all people wishing to develop understanding and knowledge.

A lot of people, from what I see, their thought don't usually extend beyond one, two, three people. If you go moving out from the centre — a bit like a chess player, just as a casual player will only think one or two moves ahead, a good chess player ten, twelve moves ahead — a thoughtful person will think more moves ahead in life and probably have an awareness of their behaviour and the impact it has on other people. (Phil, Grendon)

...What's that sort of angle kind of, what is this argument they are coming at and it allows me to ask more questions — why do you think that? Is it because of this? (Michael, Grendon)

Philosophical discussion allows participants to engage in dialogue on topics that are of interest to all people wishing to develop understanding and knowledge. As such, philosophy often focuses on topics that are abstract and impersonal. The sessions in Grendon encouraged participants to 'explore philosophical theory' (John, Grendon) and to 'openly discuss the topic of a philosopher' (Peter, Grendon).

Importantly, philosophy is not about offending behaviour. For Neil, this was a new experience in prison;

...prior to this philosophy course, all my understandings and enquiries have been an 'offender' in various environments. Now I can see some of my decisions being selfish, not

taking other people into consideration, and actually linking it in with philosophy. (Neil, Grendon)

As Tom points out, in therapy you are 'looking at how you respond to things on a day to day basis, to this event, that event' whilst in philosophy, you are encouraged to consider '*what about your philosophy of life has led you to behave in certain ways throughout your life?*' (Tom, Grendon). In philosophy, participants are encouraged to reflect on their philosophies of life, rather than specific situations.

Many of the participants were confident that philosophy '*can reinforce or back up what we're already doing here*' (Matt, Grendon). Despite the similarities, the participants make a clear distinction between the dialogue in therapy and the dialogue in the philosophy classes. Again, Tom sums this up succinctly;

Whilst in philosophy you're standing back a bit more and looking at how you're behaviour fits in with other people's behaviour and how it fits in structurally rather than tactically. It gives you a sense of perspective that you wouldn't get from anything. In the group discussions we have, things are very intense and personal, whereas in the philosophy you tend not to bring in the personal as such, you tend to look at it from a much more constructive way, a much more distant way than you would in the discussion groups. It complements, I think it does complement it, I think it helps to give it perspective. (Tom, Grendon).

This focus — on the general rather than the particular, on the person as a member of a society rather than the offender who needs to be corrected, on principles of moral action as opposed to how to behave in a given circumstance — is what *provides* the broader perspective. By looking at the world through a philosophical lens, participants developed attitudes that are more open. The following section discusses this in more detail.

Philosophical dialogue — how does it work?

'I understood that I am expected to put my point of view across in a way that allows me to get involved with the discussion' (Matt, feedback, session unknown)

Interview data and fieldwork notes suggest that both the *structure* of the classes and the *content* of the discussions were contributing factors.

In delivering course content, each session had a specific purpose. Some of the sessions would focus on a specific philosopher's work illustrating how philosophers build arguments. Others focussed on a topic and introduced different philosophical points of view introducing arguments and counter-arguments to illustrate the complexity of philosophical conversation as well as providing mechanisms to allow participants to express their own philosophies.

As an example, one of the sessions focussed on Plato's Republic, the principle of specialisation and the question of a 'just' society. Taking inspiration from Peter Worley's the 'IF' Machine, participants were asked to imagine that they, along with a small group of other people, had been stranded on a desert island.¹⁸ They were then asked 'What do you need to do to survive?',

'Who will do what?' and 'How will you make decisions?' This scenario led to in-depth and complex discussions around the necessary attributes of a good leader; societal structure; democracy and the need for representation; power and the difficulties of organising work in a fair way.

Participants also discussed the need to evaluate survivors' skills and apportion necessary tasks accordingly. This led onto the second stage which introduced the notion of specialisation — an idea discussed by Plato that states individuals should do what they are most naturally capable of doing and not interfere with others. The final stage of the session outlined Plato's theory of 'just' society, which involves segregating the population into three classes — Producers, Warriors, and Rulers.¹⁹

The structure of the discussion allowed participants time to formulate, discuss and develop their own views first. Then they were introduced to Plato's ideas and were able to compare their own standpoint with that of Plato's and interrogate their opinions in light of the new ideas introduced. As the session progressed, participants' views became more refined and sophisticated and they became more confident in providing explanation for their point of view.

Other sessions covered topics including knowledge and identity (Descartes, Hume, Arendt and Baginni), morality (Kant, Bentham and Mill) and the 'good life' (Socrates, Russell). Some sessions were paired to ensure opposing philosophies could be explored. For example,

In delivering course content, each session had a specific purpose.

18. Worley, P. (2011) *The if machine: Philosophical enquiry in the classroom*. London: Continuum.

19. The irony of Plato arguing that a just society would be ruled by an elite group of 'philosopher kings' was not lost on the participants.

covering Kant one week (deontology, the notion that actions are morally right because they adhere to a moral rule) and Bentham and Mill another (utilitarianism which focuses purely on the consequences of actions in assessing whether something is morally 'right') meant participants were encouraged to consider the fundamental principles upon which to base a moral framework for actions. For the participants, these philosophical ideas raised a multitude of questions; is it our intentions or our emotions that make something a moral act? Or is it the act itself that is inherently moral? Does morality depend primarily on consequences? At the end of each of these sessions there was a buzz, or an energy in the room, and I felt the weight of heavy intellectual discussion.

Philosophy sessions led participants through different philosophical ideas, introducing counter arguments and further developments in stages. This meant participants reassessed earlier statements in light of new information, became comfortable with changing their minds, and were able to appreciate the nuanced arguments;

...nothing's just black and white, nothing's just straight forward, you have to ...analyse it to some degree to get a better understanding of it.' (Charlie, Grendon)

...the way you were putting things together. You were bringing in something which someone said which made sense to an extent. Then we had a discussion — some agreed, some didn't. And then you brought in another thing that says the opposite thing to that or came from a different angle... So it kind of made you think, even if you agree with one thing, you end up disagreeing with another thing. (Samir)

Participants changed their minds in light of what they heard; turned over ideas; considered them from different angles and took account of a variety of factors and perspectives.

There were a few times when I was sitting and listening to people put their argument forward, when I thought it makes a lot more sense than what I was thinking. (Simon, Grendon)

This provided participants with access to ideas that they could use and implement in everyday life or simply

to develop an opinion on how *they* think things ought to be. In discussing the session on the Stoics, Matt says;

I thought the world would be such a better place if we was, we all took that stance and love your neighbour like.

This is a key part of the philosophical process. Although participants do reflect on their own opinions, beliefs and ideas, they are asked to do so in the context of the 'ought' — what should we all be doing to make society work, how should we, as members of a community and a society, behave?

The structure of the sessions meant participants had time to understand each stage, developing their own opinion, before moving onto the next. In so doing, their opinions would sometimes be exposed as being unsound, forcing them to reflect and reassess their standpoint. Through this, participants developed more nuanced opinions, became more open to hearing the ideas of others and began to think more broadly — beyond themselves and their immediate environment.

Conclusion

For the purposes of this discussion, I defined an 'open mind' as a mindset where a person is able and willing to listen to new ideas, change their mind in light of new information and consider alternative ways of thinking (see above). It has been demonstrated in this paper that engaging in philosophical dialogue is relevant to developing an open mind. Although there are clear similarities between therapeutic dialogue and philosophical dialogue, philosophy invites participants to think in a different way. By providing a space for personal exploration, for being a person rather than offender, we can develop the whole person — or more accurately, allow them to do it for themselves.

...with philosophy you can bring out your own ideas and then, through the group you can rework it, remodel it change it look at it to get to somewhere so its your part in building that and I suppose its more empowering in that sense because you are doing it yourself. (Michael, Grendon).

Within the community of philosophical inquiry, there is little to distinguish between a dialogue in a pub, a church, a school or a prison. The perspective, purpose

... participants were encouraged to consider the fundamental principles upon which to base a moral framework for actions.

and focus is the same; to further our understanding of philosophical ideas, and therefore our own opinions.

In Grendon, participating in the philosophical classes was an intellectual choice. Participants attended for the sake of attending — not to get time off their sentences, or to gain a qualification. In some cases, bringing people together in such discussion served to breakdown stereotypes; in others it served as a means of equalising participants. Despite different backgrounds and educational standards, participants across all groups were able to develop a level of respect for one another.

A note on Full Sutton

As discussed above, the course was also delivered in HMP Full Sutton over the summer of 2015. Delivering a dialogue course in a maximum security prison was a difficult, but ultimately rewarding experience. Participants in Full Sutton were not as comfortable with open, group discussion as those in Grendon. The mainstream prisoners were more boisterous, lively, and challenging and came with more underlying prejudices against each other and me. The vulnerable population were guarded and careful in their interactions with me and both groups took time to accept me into their environment. With support from my supervisor, Professor Alison Liebling, and the education staff at HMP Full Sutton, I was able to achieve a good level of philosophical dialogue among participants.

Over time, the philosophy class built trust and respect both among participants and between participants and me. By the end of the course, both classes were able to have in-depth, intellectual dialogue on a range of issues and I was able to challenge and explore the statements, opinions and, sometimes, prejudices of the participants.

Analysis of data from Full Sutton is in the early stages but indications are promising. Over time, both groups made significant progress and there is evidence to suggest that philosophy is relevant to participants' well-being, the development of a sense of community, the promotion of positive pro-social interactions and to self-reflection and personal development.

Desistance, rehabilitation and the prison regime

Current analysis of data in this project indicates that developing more open minds and broadening the perspectives of prisoners is relevant to the desistance process and to rehabilitation. Philosophical dialogue provides an opportunity to reflect on personal actions — their consequences and meaning — in the wider context of societal structure and moral frameworks. Prisoners are then able to develop an understanding of who they are and their place in the world. Current theories of desistance highlight the need for prisoners to develop a new identity²⁰ in order to leave their criminal pasts behind. Such dialogue can be a positive part of this process.

Within the context of the prison environment, philosophical dialogue is also relevant to prisoners' interactions, both with each other and with prison staff. There are promising indications from Full Sutton data that providing a space for philosophical dialogue could have a real effect on prisoners' relationships, attitudes and engagement with opportunities for self-improvement.

Next steps?

Sample sizes in this research have been small with a focus on male prisoners serving long sentences. Further research will be required to establish the relationship between philosophy and prisoner attitudes among all groups of male prisoners as well as its relevance for women, young offenders and prisoners serving short-term sentences. However, this research provides clear indications of the relevance of philosophical dialogue to the lives of prisoners and, potentially, those who work with them.

Finally, participants *enjoyed* the course. This might seem a trivial observation. However, the value of this in the context of a prison should not be overlooked. In Grendon participants are engaged in difficult, complex and heavy therapeutic work, whilst in Full Sutton participants lived in a difficult, often adversarial, environment with little intellectual stimulation. To provide a space in which prisoners, in either circumstance, can engage in philosophical dialogue that is light-hearted, interesting and enjoyable, provides an important break in these contexts.

20. See for example, Giordano, P. C., Cernkovitch, S. A. & Rudolph, J. L. (2002). Gender, Crime and Desistance: Toward a Theory of Cognitive Transformation, *American Journal of Sociology*. 107:4, pp. 990-1064; or Maruna, S. (2001). *Making Good: How ex-convicts reform and rebuild their lives*, Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.