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Teaching Philosophy to Inmates Part II: Moral Development and Teaching Ethics in Prisons

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Teaching Philosophy to Inmates
Part II: Moral Development and Teaching Ethics in Prisons

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Overview of Workshop Portion

- Why Teach Philosophy In Prison?
- Opportunities for Teaching Ethics in Prison
- Exercise 1: Pedagogical Goals
- Challenges and Conditions for Teaching in Prison
- Exercise 2: Moral and Educational Theory Commitments
- Key Findings and Claims in Prison Pedagogy Literature
- Exercise 3: Fruitful Content
- Lessons of Experience with My Prison Students
- Resources and Q and A
Why Teach Philosophy In Prison?

• A Variety of Answers
• “There’s two good things in this prison: Religion and Education. Everything else is bad.”
• Involving oneself in positive transformation of inmates
  – Recidivism
  – Rehabilitation
• Personal/professional growth of instructors
• Service to Community and to those in prison/affected by imprisonment
Opportunities for Teaching Ethics in Prison

• Some States: Current Prison Education by Universities
  – Degree Programs
  – Course Programs

• Initiatives by Institutions
  – Bard Prison Initiative

• Affiliating with Volunteer Programs or Groups
  – Character-based/faith-based programs

• Independent Initiatives
  – E.g. St. Anselm College professor teaching Plato in Women’s Prison

Classes Taught by Author with Moral Philosophy Content

  – Moral Philosophy Classes
    • Ethics
    • Political Philosophy
  – History of Philosophy Classes
  – Religious Studies Classes
  – Introduction to Philosophy
Exercise 1: Pedagogical Goals

• What are your two most important goals in teaching Ethics content in courses?
  • 1.
  • 2.

• What are two things you would want Prison students to bring away from Ethics content?
  • 1.
  • 2.
The “Captive Audience”?

- Instructors entering and engaging a very different moral environment
- The Inmate’s Institution
- Many challenges that inhibit or interfere with education
- Need for instructors to adopt dialectical approach
  - reflection on goals
  - course design
  - engaging practices
Conditions and Challenges for Teaching Ethics in the Prison Educational Environment

- Correctional Institution
- Structuring of Time
- Educational Spaces and Resources
- Lives of Prison Students
- Educational Preparation of Students
- Moral Development of Students
- Instructors Themselves
The Correctional Institution Setting

• Education must be compatible with good order of institution
  – Institutions more or less receptive to/supportive of educators coming in from outside
  – Prison staff have their own attitudes towards inmate education

• Time
  – Scheduling of classes: typically weekly, seminar format
  – Unpredictable Interruptions, lockdowns, counts

• Educational Spaces and Resources
  – Classrooms
  – Libraries
  – Computer Labs
  – Restrictions on what resources may be used
The Students

• Their Lives
  – Many have jobs in the Prison
  – Noisy cell blocks/ dorms, make it difficult to read/study

• Educational Preparation
  – Many had deficient education prior to prison
  – Many earned GEDs in prison

• Moral Development
  – Lack of moral development connected with crime
  – Prison environment on its own does not tend to promote moral development, action, community, or knowledge
  – Many students entering classes at low (1-2 Kohlberg) level of moral development
Instructors: Questions for Reflection

• What sort of obstacles might instructors themselves bring to prison education?
• What sort of preconceptions about prisoners? About prisons? About prison staff?
• What sorts of preferred pedagogy might pose problems?
• Prisoners tend to have little identification with, and much cynicism about, prevailing liberal/progressive assumptions/attitudes of many academics
Exercise 2: Moral and Educational Theory Commitments

• None of us lack preferred moral and educational theories
• Our educational goals, commitments, and modes of evaluation are tied to our theories
• 2 open-ended questions to reflect on
  – What are my most basic moral commitments or values, and what moral theory best approximates or embodies them?
  – What are my most basic educational commitments, and what educational theory best approximates or embodies them?
• Another Question: how does my moral theory connect with my educational theory?
Key Findings and Claims in Prison Pedagogy Literature: Possibilities for Moral/ Educational Theory

• Two Extreme Ends of the Spectrum
  – Prison Education as Conforming Individual to Moral Norms and Institution
  – Hermeneutics of (excessive and onesided) Suspicion

• Bard Prison Initiative (discussed in Karpowitz)
  – Focus on texts and contexts instead of just prison experience
  – Focus on structure instead of autonomous individual
  – Focus on critique of concepts instead of reinforcing norms
Posibilities for Moral/ Educational Theory (ctd.)

- Kohlberg’s Moral Development Theory
  - Now classic theory dealing with moral development
  - Articulates useful scale for moral development, which focuses on the moral reasoning involved in agents’ actions
  - Students develop through engagement, reflection processing conflicts between perspectives
  - Kohlberg actually writes about prison environments

- Steven Duguid
  - Theoretician/ Practitioner/ Administrator working in Canadian Prison System
  - Incorporates and supplements Kohlberg’s insights with variety of reflections from classical and contemporary philosophy

- Other useful supplements for Kohlberg’s theory
  - Ethics of Care and other similar (e.g. Marcellian) approaches
  - Neo-Aristotelean and other traditional moral theoretical approaches
Process and Outcomes in Moral Development Theory

• How should outcomes be framed?
  – Moral knowledge or moral behavior?
  – Education or rehabilitation?

• General assumptions (Deguid)
  – Prison students have certain deficits or underdevelopments placing them at Kohlberg Levels 1 or 2
    • Some are cognitive: have to do with knowledge, concepts, understanding
    • Some are emotional/affective
    • Some are moral: can be understood in terms of moral categories
  – Recognition of relevance of socio-economic and present environmental factors (i.e. prison context) in deficits
  – Educators are not there to change prisoners as objects
  – Educators assist prisoners develop as subjects through natural but stunted process of human growth in moral development
  – Need to proceed through and consolidate moral development stages sequentially: reasoning at each of stages 3-6
Key Findings and Claims: Effectively Promoting Moral Development

• What works? What is needed?
• Education adding different space and practice to existing ones
  – Neither oppositional to nor co-opted by prison system
  – Incorporating and reflecting on students experiences and environment
  – Offering students involvement and identifications not only with community outside prison but also cultural heritages
• Kohlberg/Deguid: issue of “Just Community”
• Deguid: broad-based humanities disciplines bring together cognitive development and moral reasoning
Effectively Promoting Moral Development (ctd.)

- Instructors as consistent cognitive, emotional, and moral models
- Cognitive development in terms of learning, thinking about, applying, understanding ethical theories, concepts, texts
- Continued self-reflection on part of students on their values, choices, behavior
- Experimentation, imaginative and dramatic role-taking, engagement with peers, working through conflicts
- Exposure to, exploration of, evaluation of others’ moral reasoning
- Practice in carrying out and articulating moral reasoning
Additional Reflections from my Experience

• Fundamental problem for prison classes: **Time**
  – Much of the learning has to take place outside of classroom in prison environment
  – Learning must be cumulative, structured, comparative, integrative
  – Course design: assignments and activities in classes should have out of class components, keeping students engaged between classes
  – Planning ahead for recurring teachable moments
    • Tropes of relativism, egoism
    • Discussions of higher and lower stages of moral reasoning applying ethical theories
  – Flexibility: being ready to seize opportunities for further exploration and for larger projects
Additional Reflections (ctd.)

• Stressing objective over subjective
  – Mastery of fundamental knowledge: positions, concepts, theories, distinctions: “learning the map”
  – Stressing developing/exhibiting understanding over agreement/ simply having the “right” answer
  – Gradually developing comfort with multiple perspectives

• Tying-in ethical content from Philosophy classes
  – Knowing the curriculum: what is going on in other instructors’ classes
  – Developing connections with prison communities and programs

• Providing conceptual structure for moral stances and reasoning: rubrics, scales, Kohlbergian stages
What Content did Prisoners find most engaging?

- Socratic Dialogues: Apology, Crito, Republic, Symposium
- Hobbes: state(s) of nature, the social contract and authority
- Virtue Ethics: determining what counts as virtues and vices, how emotions (particularly anger) can be matter for virtues and vices
- Utilitarianism: discussions involving actual calculations carried out by students
- Thomistic Principle of Double Effect: how it is applied, broader issue of how to properly describe species of moral acts
- Typical reductionist presentation of Divine Command Theory vs. Religiously derived Ethical Codes and Reasoning
- Aristotelian discussions of voluntary and involuntary, moral choice (prohairesis)
- Max Scheler’s discussions of suffering and hierarchies of value
- Josiah Royce’s discussions of loyalty
- Utilitarianism: issue of qualitatively greater pleasures or pains – and why
- Kantian Deontology: what counts as treating people as ends or means
Questions