

Prison Voices

Philosophy in Prison is a charity set up in 2018 to promote philosophical education in prisons and to explore the practical and philosophical principles that this involves. It runs courses in a range of prisons, but also aims to promote wider public discussion of the issues raised by this enterprise.

Philosophy involves deep thinking about difficult questions. For example, what makes me *me*? Does the past exist and, if so, in what way? Are the same actions always wrong, or are different kinds of actions wrong in different times and places? Thinking about questions like these can often be a baffling experience. It can also be deeply rewarding. It is often at its most rewarding when we think about these questions together, in conversation with one another.

The courses that *Philosophy in Prison* organises reflect the belief that philosophy is best done in conversation. In any philosophical conversation, we will almost certainly be puzzled, but we will have something to say about what we think. Just as importantly, however, we will have to ask what other people think, and we will have to listen carefully to their answers. We will have to be ready to have our views questioned and challenged, to respond to such questions and challenges, and to question and challenge others' views—all in the spirit of cooperative exploration. By thinking together, we can improve our abilities to give reasons for our own opinions, and we can come to reflect on how we think and live, in the company of others. We will often disagree, but we will also find that this disagreement can help us in our own thinking, and that we can start to see the value of different points of view.

Philosophical conversation can be done by anyone, regardless of their educational achievements: it depends on people and on speech, on puzzlement and reflection, not on texts. It helps the participants to develop their own voices and to hear the voices of others, to speak more articulately, to develop ideas and arguments. But they can do this only if their voices, and the voices of those with whom they are in conversation, are heard. A significant benefit of philosophy in prison is thus that it can help to give voice to those who too often are not heard, help them to develop the ability to think and speak for themselves, and to be heard to do so by others, including those coming in from outside the prison walls. This is clearly important not just for individual well-being, but for community and for society at large. Any democracy needs citizens who can engage in public discourse—citizens who can converse with each other about how they are to live together. Those who have served time in prison have a special need for civic reintegration: apart from their obvious needs for employment, housing, and so, they need to be able to re-engage with their fellow citizens; this means that they must develop voices in which they can speak and be heard. Philosophy as conversation can have this kind of benefit, however, only if others are ready to listen, only if the institutional structures within which they live make conversation possible. So the enterprise of doing philosophy in prison forces us also to think about larger questions, both in philosophy and in politics and penal policy.

What kinds of questions might these be? We offer some suggestions here, but we are sure that there are many important questions beyond these.

Our questions must begin within the prison itself. For example, does the prison's governance enable prisoners' voices to be heard, or are they treated as passive, virtually voiceless, subjects of discipline and control imposed from above? What kinds of conversation are possible, or enabled, between those inside and those outside the prison? (The right to vote, as a token of the right to engage effectively in political debate, has at least a symbolic importance in this context.)

But the questions reach well beyond the prison. They reach into the whole criminal process through which people end up in prison: we need to ask whose voices can be heard throughout that process, what obstacles there are to participation in the process as someone with a voice. They reach beyond the criminal process into the political and social structures in which those who end up in prison have lived, and which shape the ways in which each of us can engage – or not – with education, work, the police, and the community's social and political life. We must ask who among us is listened to, and who remains unheard, within these systems and structures and within the wider society around them.

At a deeper level these questions engage larger issues in philosophy. Some of these are issues about how we can best do philosophy: what are the best ways to engage in philosophical conversation; what is important or valuable about this kind of work? Some are issues about knowledge, or about our abilities to learn from one another: whose beliefs do we pay attention to; who do we expect to learn from; what kinds of knowledge do we value and what kinds do we ignore? Others are issues in political philosophy, in particular concerning democratic citizenship: what kind of voice do citizens need to have, and to be heard to have, if they are to play their part in their democracy; how can such voices be enabled?

To explore these questions and more, we plan to organise a series of online workshops during 2021, to culminate in two conferences (one in England, one in Scotland) in 2022. The participants will include philosophers; criminologists and criminal law scholars; practitioners from all parts of the criminal justice system; people who have served time in prison and who have taken philosophy courses in prison; and members of relevant voluntary organisations concerned with prisons and criminal justice.

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Draft Plan

1. Testimonial Injustice

Topics: The problems of evidence unheard. Whose voices are heard at various points in the criminal process (in criminal trials; in sentencing; during punishment), and whose are silenced—and why? Whose voices should be heard—and how can they be made audible? Problems of epistemic injustice and implicit bias.

Speakers: Philosophers of language and social epistemologists; criminal process scholars; criminal practitioners; those affected by testimonial injustice, victims and offenders; experts on race and gender.

2. Hermeneutic Injustice

Topics: How accessible is the language of the law to those on whom it impinges (to citizens, to defendants, victims and witnesses, to those being punished, and to jurors)? How far are they able, or enabled, to understand it; how can they be helped to understand it better? What kind of understanding should they have, and what hinders it?

Speakers: Social epistemologists; criminologists and criminal practitioners; psychologists; those daunted by the language of the law.

3. Philosophical conversation

Topics: How is conversation a well-founded philosophical methodology? What does such a methodology require of those who try to apply it, as teachers or as students; in what kinds of context can it succeed, or is it liable to fail?

Speakers: Philosophers working on methodology and the philosophy of philosophy; feminist philosophers; social psychologists; leaders of prison courses.

4. Voices within and from within the Prison

Topics: Discrimination; self-discrimination and the recovery of self-respect; the structures of prison life, suppression and boredom; finding one's voice; articulating emotions; hearing prison voices from outside; political engagement and the right to vote.

Speakers: Criminologists; prisoners and former prisoners; prison officers and staff; prison inspectors; prison charities; political and legal philosophers; philosophers of mind.

5. After Prison

Topics: The parole process and who can be heard; rehabilitation, restoration and re-entry; the collateral effects of punishment; the concept of the 'ex-offender'; how we can talk about prison sentences as, or to, people who have served them.

Speakers: Parole Board members; ex-prisoners; prison charities; criminologists; political and legal philosophers.

6. The State, the Polity, and Prisons

Topics: State responsibilities and the role of prison charities; prisoners as citizens or enemies; citizens' responsibilities for prisons and to (ex-)prisoners; lay participation in prisons.

Speakers: Political and penal philosophers; policy makers and politicians; prison inspectors; offenders and ex-prisoners; victims and families.