

Essay

A Prison Philosopher: A Personal Essay

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Abstract: Prison is often thought of as hell behind barbed wire, housing the most nefarious of sorts who have thrown away any inkling of wisdom. Nevertheless, a number of reasons can make prison an ideal place to develop an appreciation for, and put into practice, philosophy, the love of wisdom. I offer a rough characterization of the practice of philosophy in the context of prison. The removal of persons from a world that is comparatively unfettered to a place of silence and solitude can lead to wonder and questioning. I then consider how I, as a prison philosopher, develop questions and reflection around various ideas from God, truth, beauty, and love to death.

Keywords: prison; personal philosophy; God; truth; beauty; love; death

1. Introduction

Come to prison to find wisdom! I am sure that many would find such an invitation hard, if not impossible, to believe. Prison is often thought of as hell behind barbed wire, housing the most nefarious of sorts who have thrown away any inkling of wisdom. As with a wellspring that has been poisoned, how could anything worthwhile come from being in prison? Nevertheless, a number of reasons can make prison an ideal place to develop an appreciation for, and put into practice philosophy, the love of wisdom.¹

In what follows, I offer a rough characterization of the practice of philosophy in the context of prison. In my view, it often involves the removal of persons from a world that is comparatively unfettered to a place of silence and solitude that can lead to wonder and questioning. I then consider how I, as a prison philosopher, develop questions and reflections around various ideas from God, truth, beauty, and love, to death. This is a personal essay, reflecting my own experience and observations; obviously, I cannot address all efforts to practice philosophy in prison. Moreover, as a male in a prison with adult men, I use the terms ‘men’ and ‘man’ in a gender-specific sense in what follows, not claiming to bring to light what is true for all men and not addressing what may be different about women practicing philosophy in prison.

2. A Prison Philosopher

So, what does a prison philosopher practice? As C. Stephen Evans points out, while there is no agreed-upon view of what counts as philosophy (Evans 2018, p. 5), a universally agreed-upon core meaning, subject of inquiry, or method by which philosophy is studied is often defined by its general aim (wisdom) and by examples of its general method or inquiry (from Socrates to Thomas Nagel).² In the spirit of Evans’ observation, let us say that philosophy is *the chasing of wisdom*. I prefer saying philosophy is a “chase” because a chase often has no endpoint. In philosophy, we chase wisdom, using reason to seek knowledge about life’s most important and fundamental questions; using the light provided to us by human reason we search to understand the nature of things, even if we never reach a universal agreement on all such matters (Strauss 1957, p. 11).

What about chasing wisdom *in prison*? At first glance, practicing philosophy in prison might seem no different from practicing philosophy outside of prison. However, I suggest that this is not the case. Practicing philosophy is different in prison because it must be lived out and experienced right in front of and all around the inmate on a day-to-day basis.



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A microcosm of the outside world, prison houses inmates of different ethnicities or races, cultures, traditions, religions, and philosophies. There is the hedonist, who often gets into trouble and makes life hard for himself as he searches for pleasure. There is the Stoic, who has been in prison a lifetime, yet never complains and still finds the will to help others. The Platonist pins all his hopes on a better future outside his temporary world. There are others as well. In a sense, prison, if viewed from a philosophical cultural perspective, might be likened to a site of exhibits of different nations or cultures like a world's fair or even Disney World or Epcot. However, instead of experiencing fine wine in Epcot's French section, you will find prisoners unknowingly imbibing the ideas of Jean-Paul Sartre. Instead of eating gyros in Epcot's Greece, inmates taste the intellectual flavors of Plato and Aristotle in Christian church services. Instead of judging how much the Big Ben replica is worth in Epcot's England, they can judge how much different actions are worth according to Mill's utilitarianism. For those of us in prison, different worldviews or philosophies are present all around us. One simply needs to be aware of one's fellow inmates to critically reflect on these worldviews.

While it may come as a surprise to many, prison and philosophy share a long common history. Boethius, Miguel Cervantes, Thomas Moore, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Mahatma Gandhi, Viktor Frankl, and many other great minds, spent time locked away and became better for the experience. While the majority of these persons were incarcerated on either unjust or morally tenuous grounds, famously some of those who have served time in prison for evident crimes, such as Chuck Colson, used their time in prison for personal awakening and subsequently developed socially significant reforms. Many of the causes and ideas these people embodied would never have developed if not for their time away from the free world. These great figures pondered the big questions of life: philosophy meant something more than an academic achievement. For each, the practice of philosophy in prison not only changed the prisoner's own life, but the lives of the men around him. Indeed, what came about changed the world.

For a dream to come alive and touch the world, it must first be dreamt. Boethius' thoughts on free will still live with us today, as do the great works of Cervantes and Dostoyevsky. The civil rights victories of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. live and breathe around us. Viktor Frankl's time in the worst of prisons, a Nazi concentration camp, led him to express the commonality of all these men. He wrote about his time:

We who lived in the concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way. (Frankl 1984, p. 75)

These men, those with names history knows and those practicing philosophy without recognition, have chosen their paths even in the most dire of situations so they might lead their minds (and the minds of others) out of darkness and into the light. Those who have walked this road before us serve as examples. The Stoic philosopher Seneca urged us to find role models. Of the philosophers, he said, "We can choose whose children we would like to be. There are households of the noblest intellects: choose the one into which you wish to be adopted, and you will inherit not only their name but their property too These will offer you a path to immortality and raise you to a point from which no one is cast down" (Seneca 1997, p. 77). A prison philosopher, if he allows himself, can be guided by those whose impacts and ideas came through situations similar to his and have changed the world.

In my experience, it is easier to live in an illusion in "the free world" than it is in prison. In the free world, we may find ourselves far more restricted than we think we are. If one is a banker, one may tend to see everything focused on wealth, different perhaps from a plumber, a fashion designer, or a race car driver. Our judgments become almost automatic,

and over time any thinking that lies beyond this identity is difficult.³ We become attached to the world we found ourselves in and will defend it.

Removal from the world has often been required as a pathway to wisdom. Gautama Buddha, Henry David Thoreau, and even Hollywood's Batman and Dark Knight must face themselves without the crutches of their identity. They must leave the automatic, predictable/malleable world and venture into the unknown. So too must the prisoner leave his identity in the outside world and face himself, perhaps learning to know himself truly for the first time. Without the requirements/expectations of a worldly identity, the inmate can allow himself to pursue learning for its own sake, not learning as instrumental for some other end. Prison can at times allow for what Josef Pieper calls "leisure activities", activities which add intrinsic value and perfect the inner man and allow him to see "Life as a whole and the world as a whole; that he should fulfill, and come to full possession of his faculties, face to face with being whole" (Pieper 1952, pp. 20–22). The removal from the world perhaps allows the prisoner to free himself from the bondage of an identity illusion and the obligation to the outside world, and offers him the opportunity to liberate his mind.

The idea that prison can focus one's mind is not unknown. Writing from prison in the 1940s, the French mathematician Andre Weil wrote to his wife about the pleasures of being removed from the world. "My mathematics work is proceeding beyond my wildest hopes, and I am even a bit worried—if it's only in prison that I work so well, will I have to arrange to spend two or three months locked up every year" (Weil in Hitz 2020, p. 67). Weil understood the value of an escape from the world.

A prison philosopher can find value and comfort, leaving behind the person he thought he once was. When he returns to the outside world, he can return liberated from what might have been chains of illusion in the "free world" and hence no longer a prisoner of life.

Removed from the familiar sounds and noises he knows as part of his social identity, something strange can overtake the new inmate: interior silence. He finds himself in a place he no longer understands and without answers to the questions he thought he once knew. With this interior silence, a prisoner can gain the chance to move beyond the noise and indeed the very language of his old life. In my experience, noise can come from knowing, or thinking one knows; silence comes from not knowing. Having something to say allows the prisoner to feel a degree of comfort and power over his life and gives an illusion of knowing what is going on in an unfamiliar world. Language, borne out of the experience of prison, whether spoken or written, gives him a sense that he understands his new environment, that he "gets it". Nietzsche, Weber, and others have pointed out the need for humans to feel in power. Obviously, the will to power is evident within the prison population. Removed from the world and dictators who control us and our culture—petty or real—our true identity can be found. Within life in prison, the old thoughts and words begin to lose meaning. Robert Cardinal Sarah's great thoughts ring true: "Words often bring with them the illusion of transparency, as though they allowed us to understand everything, control everything, and put everything in order" (Sarah 2017, p. 125). Perhaps language can also obscure, which is why we need scrutiny (a deep Socratic theme).

The words a prisoner once knew can become useless in prison. *Love*—what is love if your lover leaves you? What are we to do with this word in our new world? *Justice*—what is justice when those who are supposed to protect you instead dishonor that word with verbal and physical attacks? Confronted with not knowing, with not understanding, a prison philosopher is ready to seek what, if anything at all, lies beyond that which the spoken or written word signifies and begins to refine his understanding. If the prisoner allows it, his interior silence can humble him. To paraphrase Socrates, it will no longer allow him to think he knows what he does not know. No longer a prisoner of his illusory identity, a prison philosopher can begin to re-think things he thought he knew. This leads to Socratic questioning.

Amidst a prisoner's new interior silence, questions begin to arise which become almost obsessions. He wants to know "why", and not just the "why" which pertains to his own

life, but the universal “why” of life. He becomes unsure that words he once knew have any meaning at all. Pieper notes that the philosopher “is beside himself because he is moved to the core by the wonder of this world” (Pieper 1992, p. 17). He seeks meaning, and his questions and wonderment can lead him, as it has led others for centuries, to the path of philosophy. Aristotle said, “For it is owing to their wonder that men both now and at first began to philosophize” (Aristotle 2001, p. 692). A prison philosopher can begin as a child again, full of wonder yet frightened as he loses his former place in the world. Philosophy is no longer an abstraction to which he gives “notional assent”, and he begins to give “real assent” in working out the puzzle his questions represent.⁴ Philosophy becomes real.

To recap, the removal from the world outside, and a prison philosopher’s interior silence, his questioning, his wondering about those questions, and his experience in working out the puzzles they represent, comprise the beginning of the practice of philosophy in prison.

3. God

Anyone who has studied or experienced even just a little of prison culture or spent any time among inmates understands how easily linked are the prisoner’s situation and the question of God. Prisons offer countless religious classes aimed at restoring the inmate’s inner being. Most of the radio stations prisoners can access are religious ones, and even in the Alcoholics Anonymous/Narcotics Anonymous meetings, inmates voice Reinhold Niebuhr’s *Serenity Prayer*. The concept of God is a constant presence in everyday prison life where conditions are ripe for religion. Prisoners with no outside religious affiliation—locked up, alone, in need, and very often afraid of tomorrow—often find themselves praying before court dates, parole hearings, or any number of stressful events. A prisoner will pick up a holy book and search for anything that might aid in changing his situation, maybe a “Hail Mary” pass in this dire situation in his life. As Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi contends, religion and the idea of a God can bring order to life when life feels in chaos (Csikszentmihalyi 2008, p. 879). This order and sense of well-being often proves difficult to maintain. Courts often hand down long sentences, and parole can be denied for what can seem like unfair reasons. A wife or partner evanesces into a memory, and one forgets what one’s loved one looks like, or smells like. After these external realities become distanced, the idea of God can seem facile at best.

At some point, most prisoners experience a setback of some sort, and any sentiment about God a prisoner had developed threatens to disappear. Only then does the one practicing philosophy separate himself from the majority in his contemplation of God. He searches for internal rather than external ideas of deity, which often proves more satisfying and longer lasting. There is a running joke in prison. It is said that just outside the exit door after release, there is a wastebasket full of every kind of holy book, thrown away because God has fulfilled his purpose. A prison philosopher knows better. Even if he does not ever truly believe in God, because he has confronted the question of God as more than a passing thought, his whole being is affected by his questioning. That questioning will prove to be Pandora’s Box, letting loose many other questions.

4. Truth

The idea of truth can be tricky anywhere, but in prison, truth—and related notions like trust—is especially vexing. Truth is closely tied up with the question of trust. Can I trust you if I believe that what you are saying is not true? There is a saying in prison, “I’ve lost everything; all I have is my word”. If one’s word is not trusted, the result can be catastrophic. However, what should one trust?

“What is truth?” can be one of the most important questions an inmate can ask as it has immediate practical consequences for him. Additionally, wrestling over what counts as truth can be a deep source of cognitive dissonance as one tries to reconcile (or at least compare) the truth as seen by one’s parole board and the truth as seen through the lens of one’s cultural upbringing, religious background, or gang code.

In prison, one of the reference points for truth comes from the institution itself. Often the prison system itself, and those who work in it, send this message: “Obey, Obey, Obey”. The prison institution can assume the status of God or the divine. As sociologist James M. Henslin writes, during a “degradation ceremony”, institutions “suppress the norms of ‘the outside world,’ replacing them with their own rules, values, interpretation of life” (Henslin 2000, p. 86). The institutional rules and regulations can very easily become our “truth”. A case of Stockholm syndrome can lead us to fall in line with these “truths”. This first approach to truth is in accord with Friedrich Nietzsche’s observation that those with “superiority in matters of power refer to themselves . . . as ‘the truthful’ . . . someone who is, who has reality, who is real, who is true . . . [in contrast to] the *deceitful* common man” (Nietzsche 1998, pp. 15–16).

A second point of reference for truth is lodged in civil law. Is truth a matter of civil law and the institutions and agents that impose it (legislatures, justices, lawyers, juries)? This option invites us to reflect on whether or not civil law is backed up with an appeal to (or maybe critiqued from the standpoint of) some higher law, natural law, eternal law, or “objective truth”. In *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. cites St. Thomas Aquinas: “An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law” (King 1963, *Letter from Birmingham Jail*). Could there be a higher truth/law to which we might appeal, or perhaps there is really nothing further and no real objectivity in ethics at all? A prisoner might see this latter option initially as freedom from the guilt of obligation to some divine truth or objectivity, but then freedom begins to frighten him. He may conclude that life cannot be understood; life is not worth living; and sadly, suicide sometimes results. The pursuit or chase to find the truth can lead to existential freedom, but this can become too much to bear.

I am not taking sides here on the concept of truth and the status of civil and natural law. I am instead highlighting the entangled complexities as a prisoner addresses the question of truth and trust in the context of an institution that assumes monumental control and power over one’s life. The assumption of control impacts the search in prison for what is good.

5. The Good

The prisoner often hears the word “good”. He hears that he is not “good”, which resulted in his incarceration. He hears the command to “be good” uttered by prison staff, as well as “Obey the rules”, and “Show up for your non-paying job”. He often hears, “Do not talk back”, even when being accused unjustly. He is asked to “take it”, whatever “it” is, and that “it” is “good”. In prison culture, on the other hand, “good” has another meaning. The prison code asks one to “See no evil, and speak no evil”. Hence, the word “good” has myriad meanings where all seem to make sense in some way, some more than others, with the word eventually losing meaning given its many uses. From the myriad of “goods” a prison philosopher needs to seek understanding.

A proper understanding of what is good and how to practice it is very important to a prisoner. He sees that “good” can be played out on a purely bestial, biological level. Good for some is the fulfillment of basic needs as well as emotional satisfaction. Eating, sleeping, and desire for sex pervade the thoughts of these men. They will fight if provoked and often give in to their most basic passions. However, even some of those who believe in a purely biological “good” will still see that their indulgences result in an ugly world. Then, there are those who will follow diligently the rules set by prison administration and staff without question, lionizing those rules regardless of their appropriateness. Some accept society’s view that prisoners should suffer the worst Draconian punishments with “a good beating”. Others simply fall into the subjective, accepting that their environment is neither good nor evil, but as Montaigne says of life, whatever they make of it. A prison philosopher wades through these ideas and seeks to find the good that will not only facilitate his rehabilitation in prison, but his rehabilitation as a human being. He digs (as I am trying to dig) deeper. This leads me to employ a combined chasing after beauty and goodness.

6. Beauty

According to Dostoyevsky, “Beauty will save the world” (Dostoyevsky 2004, p. 446). In an incarcerated philosopher’s practice, it can often save his own world and life. Beauty is what can help us envision a better life and prepare us to seek what is true and good. It has the ability to pull our minds to higher questions and cause us to become actively engaged in philosophy. Prison is cold, industrial, and ugly by design, and yet prisoners themselves bedeck their cells with art, create poetry, and create music. Their inner longing for beauty has not been vanquished by their ugly surroundings. Photos can create beauty in the prisoner’s personal world. For a prison philosopher, photos of family members, children, loved ones, and even lost lovers become Dante’s Beatrice, taking his hand and gently leading him up the ladder to higher thoughts and questions, challenging him to be better, understand more, and even, if just for a split second, giving a sense of peace and understanding. He may never see those people or places again, for they may have moved on, forgotten about him, or passed away, but the beauty he sees in those photos lives on and saves him time and time again. He begins to see the beauty in small things.

In the winter of 2021, Texas experienced one of the worst freezes in state history. Nerves were already on edge because the prison system had already been on total lockdown due to COVID-19. Prisoners were confined to a cell not much larger than a minivan; phone calls were limited to five minutes per day, and no visitors were allowed. Two inmates, who had been in a fight over something unimportant the previous night, accompanied me to the dayroom for phone calls. Texas prisons, for the most part, have no major cooling or heating systems, and the temperature was five degrees above zero Fahrenheit. During this dayroom time, the guard watching us did something uncharacteristic of guards. Reaching into a pile of snow, he rolled it into a ball and threw it at one of the prisoners. Stunned for a second, the inmate followed suit and, creating a snowball, threw it at the guard. Soon the guard and the two men were engaged in an all-out snowball fight. As I was on the phone I watched them, marveling at the surprising beauty of three men of different races, educations, and social statuses simply enjoying a moment of life together. In the words of St. Augustine of Hippo, “Beauty so ancient and so new” (Augustine 2017, p. 258). It was ancient because it was not created by the world of time, and new in its ability to surprise. In every photo, a prison philosopher finds beauty, in silly little snowball fights he finds redemption, and he seeks all the little pieces of beauty that will always seem new and surprise him once again.

7. Love

Love gives itself to beauty, which attracts us “to believe in the truth and choose good” (Miravalle 2019, p. 50). It is therefore one of the most pragmatic and active ideas in all of philosophy, taking on an even higher importance in prison. Modern investigation of love often stops at the neurological examination of chemicals cascading into the emotion we feel and call love. It is paradoxical that in prison, love is both easy to learn, yet difficult to practice. In prison, we are forcibly removed from those we love most, and paradoxically learn to love them more. We are forced to detach physically from the objects of our love and, in so doing, often release them to life without us. Lifelong friends forget us, and we watch lovers move on, and children learn to call other men “Dad”.

One of my favorite writers, Thomas Merton, said, “We cannot see things in perspective until we cease to hug them to our own bosom. When we let go of them we will begin to appreciate them as they really are” (Merton 1999, p. 4). I do not claim to know with certainty if love is more than just those chemicals scientists study, but I can hope it is, hope in love, and hope is what makes one a true student of philosophy in and out of prison. As Iris Murdoch wrote, “Love is the tension between the imperfect soul and the magnetic perfection which is conceived of lying beyond it” (Murdoch in Taliaferro 2011, p. 21). While the objects of this tension may be thousands of miles away or from many days past, they can perfect us, cleanse us, rehabilitate us, and save us.

8. Death

For many, the subject of death is taboo. Fast paced jobs, busy family schedules, and constant consumerism divert the mind from the cold, hard fact that we will all die someday. In prison, the inmate comes face-to-face with death, whether he wishes to or not. Inmates are confronted with violently induced deaths, suicides, deaths after a lifetime in prison, and in some places, deaths carried out by the state. Surrounded by death under the very roof they share, inmates face the question of their own deaths constantly, lending urgency to every other question encountered thus far. After learning of the death of a loved one on the outside, or a friend inside prison walls, or just living in the presence of death every day, a prison philosopher can begin to feel a deep sense that he is not living authentically. He finds himself asking questions he would prefer to avoid. "Why am I in prison? Am I a better person now? What have I really done with my life?" Confronting death forces a new awareness of time, and he understands better that "unfinished business" is a significant problem as one faces death (Kubler-Ross 1969, p. 241). As in the free world, he plans for a tomorrow that may never come. Surrounded by death, a prison philosopher confronts the phenomenon of his own life existentially, right here and right now. A fight, an illness, or even a surprise pandemic can move tomorrow to today. The poet Virgil wrote, "Death twitches my ear. 'Live,' he says. 'I am coming'" (Virgil 1966, *copa*. 1.38). I would change that to say, "Think, I am coming". Prison is the ideal place to feel the spark of life in wisdom and philosophy, in large part because prison encompasses the stillness of death.

9. Conclusions

Given the situation in which a prisoner finds himself, removed from the world, in silence and wonder, encountering fear and even death, the practice of philosophy offers a chance to chase answers for questions that were hidden in his previous life, answers that provide perhaps even just a hint of wisdom. I can imagine that it might be difficult to convince many in the outside world that those of us in prison are not poisoned people, and that wisdom can come forth from this place. I hope that we may be heard, as I truly believe that many within these walls are philosophers, clouds of witnesses who might someday change the world's thinking about the least of society, and that our practice of philosophy will make a difference. I know that when this practice of philosophy spreads, the more we can talk and teach and learn. I challenge anyone reading this essay to remember, next time they pass the barbed-wired walls of a prison, that inside there are men who are not just doing time, but who are studying, practicing, and living kindness, beauty, philosophy, and love. I invite them to read a book by Dostoyevsky or Solzhenitsyn, Martin Luther King, Jr. or Malcolm X, or any video or story of modern-day prison life. I invite everyone to find not just sorrow and brutality, but wisdom in prison, and to remember that there are philosophers who live within prisons.

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Notes

- ¹ This is an unusual contribution to our journal: personal reflections on practicing philosophy in prison. This is not an essay written by someone outside the carceral system relying on the testimony of philosophically oriented prisoners. The author has first-hand experience of his topic. In recent years, a number of philosophers, including Charles Taylor and Alasdair MacIntyre, have praised the philosophical significance of first-person narratives, and some feminist philosophers, such as Karen Warren, have woven personal stories into their contributions to ethics. In keeping with this narrative philosophical methodology, we have invited Alexander Brown to reflect philosophically from his personal standpoint of someone serving a sentence in a Texas state prison. Readers should not expect to find in this essay a comprehensive philosophy of incarceration or punishment. This essay should be read as a starting point for further reflection. As one reviewer of the paper put it, Socrates would love to talk with the author (and vice versa). Charles Taliaferro and Paul Reasoner, Co-Editors of *Justice, Ethics, and Philosophy of Religion* (Special Issue, *Religions*)
- ² With thanks to my good friend, Jamie Spiering, Professor of Philosophy, Benedictine College.

- ³ See System 1 vs. System 2 thinking in Daniel Kahneman (2011), *Thinking Fast and Slow*, (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).
- ⁴ For more on notional assent vs. real assent, see John Henry Newman, *The Grammar of Assent*.

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