

'Philosophy Behind Bars: Growth and Development in Prison'
by Dr Kirstine Szifris

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Dr Kirstine Szifris, a criminologist and researcher from Manchester Metropolitan University has drawn on many of history's greatest philosophers; from Plato, Kant, Mill to Russell - all are sworn into service to assist Szifris (2021) in the construction of her new book *Philosophy Behind Bars: Growth and Development in Prison*. The literary volume is a thought-provoking and at times challenging piece of work, describing an ambitious and conceivably unique project within the prison system. The book details her in-depth ethnographic account of her work, which employed a Socratic style philosophy programme to prisoners in two prisons in the UK. The research takes place within the context of two very distinct prison institutions, HMP Full Sutton and HMP Grendon. Full Sutton being your more traditional maximum-security penal facility, whereas Grendon is built around a distinctive co-productive therapeutic model with a real focus on a democratic process and governance - a more contrasting scene in which to conduct a cutting-edge philosophy programme could not have been found. The author paints the progress, challenges and wider implications of 'philosophising' in an extreme environment with her intensive 12 weeks programme. The story is also told both from the authors own candid fieldnotes, as well as the prisoners' own personal perspectives and voices.

A detailed breakdown of each chapter is beyond the scope of this review, however broadly the body of work is broken down through a series of critical ideas/themes, such as identity – how does one define themselves in this environment of trust, how do you build such capital/relationships? Similar questions are asked on empathy, personal growth, hierarchies and power. Famous philosophical thought experiments are brought to bear to explore these complex ideas such as 'The Ship of Theseus' to unpick identity and selfhood, Hume's 'bundle theory of the self' for how we acquire knowledge, or Descartes 'evil demon' scenario to understand the difference between knowledge and belief. The author even uses the allegory of Plato's republic in order to ask what a good and justice society is. Through the medium of philosophy, you experience first-hand some of the extreme difficulties educational practitioners must face when working with this complex population, attempting to overcome barriers such as mistrust and division. The author then ends the book on her final reflections alongside all of their methodological and ethical justifications etc. Due to its narrative, and accessibly written style, it could find itself on a variety of bookshelves and appeal to a wide range of audiences both academic and non-academic. It would intrigue those from an educational background, ethics, social sciences (especially those involved in gender, race and social psychology) – equally, however, to those who just have a general interest in 'total' institutions like the prison system.

There are several assets to this text worth expounding, it was especially poignant that Szifris's programme of philosophy was running alongside the therapeutic community at Grendon, which revealed some fascinating comparisons between the different models especially regarding identity and self-reflection. The author accounts conveyed that those engaged in the therapeutic process took to the philosophical work with far greater ease, whereas those in the 'mainstream' prison population it was revealed, required considerably more effort from the author to gain the introspective skills necessary to grasp other perspectives and arguments. Secondly, this work shouldn't be confused as being in any way atheoretical, the author draws heavily and from a range of sociological and criminological paradigms to make sense of her findings, acknowledging her own position as an observer, figure of authority, but also as co-enquirer with her fellow intellectual explorers. There is a clear and successful attempt to build on earlier works, Alison Lieblich's (2012) features heavily with her earlier work on the possibility of human flourishing and the moralistic spaces in prison environments. As

well as Mauruna's (2011) framework for example, of narrative/biographical 'meaning making', as a tool for creating and understanding criminogenic change within an individual. Finally, although not a focus of the text, Szifris revealed many other fascinating aspects to prison life that would be useful to a range of scholars such as extreme gender identities, forced religious conversations and anyone with an interest in prison dynamics more generally. Arguably this usefulness is not just confined to academics but has wider implications for well-being as the Socratic style intervention seemed to provide all manner of "mental stimulation", and a "safe space to articulate an opinion (to drop the mask). In prison this matters." (Szifris, 2021, p.163).

What was unexpected about the work is how the weekly dialogues revealed fascinating aspects to prison culture, in many cases using the prisoner's own words to capture their ideas and modes of behaviour; although it may have also been useful to hear from some of the experiences of prison professionals working in that challenging space. The text contains captivating accounts of the programme unintentional revealing, of a whole host of prisoner dynamics such as the performance of hyper-masculine identities; 'front' culture, fear of victimisation, resistance to authority and excelling at education programmes which can be a threat to certain forms of masculinity (Maguire, 2021). Although Szifris does not angle the programme at any type of criminogenic 'solution' to offending, it nonetheless raised many critically important questions relating to desistance, such as: can you 'grow' in a prison environment? What are the roles of educational programmes more generally in a prison, are they merely a vehicle for changing maladaptive behaviours or does their obligation extend to providing a whole person, more holistic approach to well-being?

Thinking critically about the body of work, there were a few limitations. It's important to acknowledge the impact that you as a researcher have on the object of study, with the whole host of biases and assumptions that we as researchers bring to the process. It cannot be ignored that the author was female in an entirely male and arguably hypermasculine space which may have an effect upon her participants behaviour and performance. There were also important themes that emerged from the philosophical work and the data analysis phase, that were left unexplored, such as the religious tensions between groups (e.g., forced conversions) and the prisoner dynamics between the mainstream and vulnerable prisoners. There were a plethora of research avenues this work revealed and leaves open to further investigation – where else can philosophy be brought to bear within the prison system to improve the lives of these incarcerated individuals? Although beyond the scope of the writing, the author's sessions/accounts also inadvertently displayed some of the racial and religious tensions that exist in penal populations, as well as the marked psychological differences between the more typical prisoners in contrast to the segregated vulnerable prison populations (those convicted of stigmatised offences).

In coming to a close, one of Szifris's contributions to the field is in its future provision, with the compelling evidence that her participants had taken some of their revelations and insights achieved from the philosophy classroom such as the nature of a 'the good life' etc. The participants had started to apply the lessons to their own world views, becoming more tolerant of other prisoners' and differences of opinion more generally. The prisoners seemingly gained the ability to analyse something quite abstract and applied it usefully to their own lives, experiences and offending journeys. At a time of offender management based primarily on the paradigm of risk, this account of philosophising in prisons offers a fresh look into what offender priorities could or should be. This is not a text arguing for philosophy as yet another accredited skills-based intervention programme offering to improve long term desistance. However, through philosophy the author provides an ancient solution to a modern problem, by demonstrating that every human being has a fundamental right, arguably need, for human growth and development regardless of their crime.

References

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