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Pedagogy for the Incarcerated: Augmenting the Socratic Method in Inmate Rehabilitation

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ABSTRACT

This essay discusses the use of the Socratic Method in criminal rehabilitation. Ample scholarly research discusses the modern programs and pedagogies employed in many US prisons such as cognitive therapy, but the work of Peter Boghossian suggests that the Socratic Method is similarly effective in helping inmates improve critical and moral reasoning. This essay expands upon Boghossian's research through the work of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in conjunction with Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" from *The Republic*. A synthesis of the ideas from these works begins to reveal the source of the Socratic Method's effectiveness as well as informing and augmenting the pedagogy itself. Considering Freire's ideas on oppressive ideologies as a major obstacle in inmate rehabilitation, an idea central to the "Allegory of the Cave," leads to an understanding of the need to elevate not only critical and moral reasoning in inmates but *conscientização*— learning to perceive and act upon social, political, and economic contradictions. By developing these critical aspects of consciousness, inmates have the ability to not only integrate themselves into society, but begin their own critical transformations of the world around them.

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Just as objective social reality exists not by chance, but as the product of human action, so it is not transformed by chance. If humankind produce social reality (which in the “inversion of the praxis” turns back upon them and conditions them), then transforming that reality is an historical task, a task for humanity.

-Paulo Freire

Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave,” at the outset, claims to be an analogy for “the human condition – for our education or lack of it” (240). To unpack this idea of the human condition, the allegory depicts the relationship between people and the world in which they develop and how their perception of that relationship influences their development. Plato describes a scene of prisoners: immobilized and having experienced nothing but the shadows cast before them. Their experiences are limited to the point that they go so far as to name and base games on these images, in turn creating a social hierarchy as they allocate status to their peers best able to perform in relation to them (241). Comparing the situation of the Allegory to this essay’s epigraph by Paulo Freire – a radical humanist educator of acclaim in the mid to late 1900s who worked with illiterate oppressed peasants in Brazil – the “objective social reality” Plato’s prisoners reside in is the product of their action, whether by the puppeteers creating the shadows or the complicity of the prisoners in accepting the chains and shadows forming their experience. In turn, all involved will further become a result of the environment and ideas to which they are exposed. Plato and Freire suggest how an individual, immersed in a situation, will be molded in relation to the physical and social components of that situation, as can be seen in the same way that the prisoners’ entire way of life is based on these passing shadows of which they have no real knowledge.

Considering the relationship between environmental influences and the self, this essay begins to examine the rehabilitative efforts in the contemporary American prison system. Proceeding from present methodology, a

transition will be made comparing the ideas of the “Allegory of the Cave” to the approach of Paulo Freire in order to demonstrate not only the similarities between the two but how Freire’s approach more closely adheres to Plato’s ideas of a proper education leading to a discussion of how they may be applied in the context of inmate rehabilitation.

Plato envisions releasing a prisoner. For these individuals, their situation was so convincing that they had gone so far as to create games and allocate social status based on performance in relation to those games. As they had only experienced the shadows, the direct exposure from standing up and turning around to see the firelight and alien situation behind them would cause such pain and confusion that they would “turn away and run back to the things he could make out, and [...] take the truth of the matter to be that these things are clearer than what he was being shown” (242). This negative reaction causes Plato to view education, or freeing the prisoner, not as the act of “implanting” or forcing them to turn around but, as a sort of gradual “turning” (246) till they can accustom themselves to the light and “bear [...] the sight of real being and reality at its most brightest” (245). In Plato’s thought, one must help such a prisoner move beyond their present level of existence, to be able to see beyond the limitations of their perception and the situation they were born into and, as described in the Cave, the role of the teacher has more to do with the act of properly orienting them so they can guide themselves: not “implanting” a new worldview or forcing them up the path.

The themes in Plato’s work on orientation of a student, written thousands of years ago, are being applied to the United States prison population. There is a massive body of work on directing or rehabilitating prison inmates in the field of psychology, and a review of these modern methods begins to highlight some of the similarities between contemporary ideas and Plato’s. Currently, the predominant method of inmate rehabilitation is based on cognitive-behaviorism: the concept that behaviors are the result of cognitions which

we can monitor and change, thus altering future behaviors (Wilson 173). Within cognitive-behaviorism there are a number of forms of therapy, the two dominant programs being Moral Reconciliation Therapy (MRT) and Reasoning & Rehabilitation (R&R). A meta-study done by Leana Allen and David Wilson on the use of a number of forms of cognitive therapy in inmate rehabilitation suggest two are at least somewhat successful in reducing recidivism. In the study MRT was found to have as much as a 15% reduction in recidivism and R&R an 8% reduction (199). Moral Reconciliation Therapy draws on Kohlberg's Hierarchy of Moral Development where individuals "are assumed to pass through a series of stages of moral development, culminating in the highest levels of moral reasoning" (Allen 499). Through "confrontation of an individual's thoughts and behaviors, with participants being required to describe, assess, and criticize their beliefs and attitudes," MRT is intended to help inmates progress through these stages by identifying the weaknesses in their current thought processes (499). Sessions consist of workbook exercises and discussions on subjects such as the source of unhappiness and identification of goals (Wilson 186). Reasoning & Rehabilitation, acting as an "educational, skills-based" intervention," attempts to assist inmates by helping them focus on "developing self-control, social skills, problem-solving abilities, and the ability to critically assess their thinking" (Allen 500). The program, for the most part, consists of presentations, games, and group discussions (Wilson 190). In essence, R&R focuses on critical thinking and information processing. In order to assist inmates, rehabilitative programs such as MRT and R&R make use of common pedagogical methodology such as dialogue and a student/teacher relationship.

Examining the outcomes of these two therapies, Peter Boghossian in his article, "Socratic Pedagogy, Critical Thinking, and Inmate Education," attempts to show how use of the Socratic Method can simultaneously accomplish the same goals. One progresses through five stages in Socratic Dialogue starting with a question (wonder), resulting in an attempt at an answer (hypothesis), followed by a refutation through counterexamples (elenchus) which if sufficient, results in a new hypothesis (acceptance/rejection), until finally ending in alteration of future behavior based on finding a satisfactory hypothesis (act accordingly) (Boghossian 44-

45). In an effort to show how the Socratic Method fosters the moral reasoning and critical thinking sought after from the cognitive-behavioral therapy perspective, Boghossian reviews four discussions he had with inmates based on this ancient pedagogy showing how each, in some way, contributed to these goals. At its core, the Socratic Method is dialogue focused on questions such as "What is it to be virtuous?" (44), therefore automatically engaging its interlocutors in moral reasoning. In the context of Plato's Allegory, the Socratic Method not only represents the kind of "turning" (246) Plato believes consists of a true education, but it begins to ask interlocutors to examine the relationship between the environment and the ideas it has engendered in them. Responding to and refining the questions through the hypothesis and elenchus results in participants evaluating positions, and it engages them in critical thinking with the entire process as a whole, creating a kind of metacognition similar to that sought after in MRT and R&R.

While Boghossian has done exceptional work showing the Socratic method's potential in criminal rehabilitation as a valid replacement to present methods, in many ways it still functions with many of the same pedagogical assumptions as its modern cognitive therapy variants such as the outcome of dialogue, definitions of knowledge, and the dynamics in the student/teacher relationship, therefore having similar levels of success.

An assessment of the pedagogy of Paulo Freire, as well as a return to the Allegory of the Cave to examine Plato's ideas on education, creates a strong position for new approaches to inmate rehabilitation while informing and augmenting the Socratic Method itself. Prior to his analysis of approaches to education, Freire discusses a common student/teacher interaction which characterizes an alienating and pervasive ideology serving as an obstacle to one's development. Linda Best, in her discussion on pedagogical methodology in ESL, serves to describe Freire's concerns: "the distance, exemplified by economic standing, which separated teachers from students, reinforced students' alienation in the classroom. Rather than recognizing the individual needs of impoverished students, teachers blamed their learners for the [resultant insubordination] and responded with a mission dedicated to imposing mechanistic, authoritarian thought on the students in order to 'teach' them" (5). The "Allegory of the Cave" contains an extreme example in

how the prisoners, upon concluding that their former companion's upward journey had caused him harm would, when he tried to free them too, instead "grab hold of anyone who tried to set them free [...] and kill him" (243). Unwilling to consider the possible circumstances creating a given situation, the response is often to impose and reinforce one's worldview and silence dissent. Such an interaction is a theme found throughout Freire's work as well as Plato's Allegory wherein the only viable response to an obstacle is with imposition of one's own ideology and will. Such an approach carries a dual concern: as such interactions between teachers and students only serve to alienate all sides reducing the effectiveness of the classroom, or rehabilitative efforts. Additionally, as one will be surrounded by such an environment they, like the prisoners in the cave, will be conditioned by it. Freire's pedagogy attempts to overcome this mentality and the harsh views of reality it engenders on all sides for its participants through new views on old approaches.

Forming the foundation for his approach in his seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire introduces his work with a dichotomy: "Concern for humanization leads at once to the recognition of dehumanization, not only as an ontological possibility but as an historical reality. And as an individual perceives the extent of dehumanization, he or she may ask if humanization is a viable possibility" (43). This idea of humanization/dehumanization starts to make a lot more sense when he begins to evaluate what he calls the "Banking" model of education wherein lessons consist of narrated contents by a teacher to be filed and stored by passive students (71). In Freire's view, this kind of dehumanizing education where "the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits" (72) gives cause for concern in that it leads people to be passive and accepting of the world around them and it inhibits their creativity (77). For Freire, a properly humanizing education should result in "*conscientização*": learning to perceive and act upon social, political, and economic contradictions, which leads one to taking action on the oppressive parts of reality (35). Freire's response to the Banking Concept is "Problem-Posing" education where, instead of narrated information to be memorized, students are posed with "problems of human beings in their relations with the world" (79). He writes that

the students [...] are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher. The teacher presents the material to the students for their consideration and reconsiders her earlier consideration as the students express their own. [...] Students, as they are increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge. Because they apprehend the challenge as interrelated to other problems within a total context, not as a theoretical question, the resulting comprehension tends to be increasingly critical [...] Their response to the challenge evokes new challenges, followed by new understandings; and gradually the students come to regard themselves as committed. (81)

Linda Best notes how Freire's pedagogy, while seemingly strange, is actually a "reiteration and application of timeless, traditional principles regarding the educational process" (14) – principles such as those found in the Socratic Method. At their core these two pedagogies share dialogue and student engagement as their foremost tools in the pursuit of education (Best 14); upon further analysis, MRT and R&R utilize many of the same tools as part of their methodology. In a comparison of a number of pedagogies from the Socratic Method to Freire's Problem-Posing and even the Harvard Business School's Case Method, Linda Best notes that "important to dialogue is the outcome a teacher wishes it to reach; in Freire's case dialogue provides a means to [...] social action" (15). This empowerment of students is, for Best, the bridge between Freire's pedagogy, to educate and liberate oppressed illiterate peasants in Brazil, and other educational contexts (3), potentially, even inmate rehabilitation in the US.

To achieve an environment where such learning can occur, Freire reworks certain basic concepts of education. In Best's analysis of Freire, these concepts consist of "certain political views regarding equity, social theories regarding learning contexts, epistemology describing knowledge as 'acting and doing,' and a psychology describing human potential" (21). His psychology of human potential is epitomized in *conscientização* – learning to perceive and act upon social, political and economic contradictions. Key to this concept is the idea of perception as an ever-expanding process: "women and

men, simultaneously reflecting on themselves and on the world, increase the scope of their perception, [and] they begin to direct their observations towards previously inconspicuous phenomena" (82). This idea of perception as an expanding process has a parallel in the Allegory. Plato illustrates the resulting enlightenment upon finally exiting the cave: he describes that the adjustment to the sun would result in their "deduc[ing] that it is the source of the seasons and the yearly cycle [...] and that in a sense everything which he and his peers used to see is its responsibility" (242). From coming to see the cave as but a fragment of the truth, the inmate's perception of their situation begins to increase in scope allowing them to react to that situation in more profound ways.

For Freire, a learning environment that gives rise to *conscientização* would not be found in the discussions created by Socrates. He was often depicted by Plato facilitating dialogues with an interlocutor in a manner which controlled the whole enterprise through direct questioning and harsh rebuttals in his own quest for knowledge, in turn devaluing the acts of cognition of his counterparts (Best 17). On the opposite end of the spectrum, Freire "labors as a facilitator, encouraging students to reflect critically and formulate solutions to act" (16). Removing the teacher and their thoughts and concerns from the center of the conversation allows student thought to become the central focus of the classroom. Freire seeks for the dissolution of the traditional terms of the student/teacher relationship in hopes of empowering the actors in his dialogue. Thematically, Freire's ideas of an educator as a facilitator appear very similar to the "turning" (246) discussed by Plato as being necessary to a proper education as his approach appears to acknowledge that it requires the students' own thought and action for them to ever turn around, learn to bear the light, and go up the path.

Part of what makes Freire's kind of dialogue possible is in the approach to subject matter taken by the teacher. Education with a teacher narrating information for a student to memorize and recite is to remove the student and their lives as the central focus. If Freire's goal is to empower his students with *conscientização*, it will occur in "acts of cognition" on the part of the students, not as "transfers of information" from the teacher (Freire 79). Therefore, an education where "the content is in a constant dialectical relationship with the[ir] needs" (Best 6), where what is discussed directly relates to their

lives instead of being completely removed from their existential experience (such as questions of virtue), engages the student and causes them to begin to examine the way they exist in and as part of the world.

Fundamental to this practice of student-centered learning is the way in which one defines "knowing." If only called on to memorize and recite, if only validated upon giving the perfect response in regards to a subject they have little personal attachment to, a student will become alienated as the concerns of the classroom are so far removed from their own. Freire calls for an epistemology that defines knowing not just as memorizing, but as action and reflection – a praxis of reformulating previous opinions again and again based on experience; part of what validates such an approach is the kind of information sought after: of "problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world" (81). How to go about one's life is in large part open to interpretation and for Best, such information is "shaped by learners as they reflect on their respective profession and social contexts" (23); it is knowledge created through a critical mindset and based directly on their lives and experiences, and such an approach to knowledge has a similar ring to Plato's "turning" (246).

Freire's hope is that by fundamentally altering the way a teacher goes about their profession – from the authority they display in the classroom, the management of subject matter, to their views of epistemology, and the intended outcome of their pedagogy – a student, feeling increasingly challenged by the subject matter, will come to "apprehend the challenge as interrelated to problems within a total context, not as a theoretical question" (81). Examining some of Boghossian's conversations with inmates in light of Freire's views on pedagogy reveals occurrences where he encountered some of the limits of Socratic dialogue, as well as some of its potentials. In his first conversation, where the dialogue starts with one hypothesis as "being true to my family and people I call friends" (48), Boghossian attempts an elenchus by inquiring if this went so far as burying a body. Upon failing with his refutation, one of the inmates responds "you don't know none of our friends" (50), signaling one of the limitations on traditional views of a teacher as omniscient and giving Boghossian an interesting moment of insight: what the last inmate said helped him understand that his life situation was so different from the inmates that he never realized how close the

possibility of burying a body was to theirs. Another inmate proceeds to offer a successful refutation that Boghossian admits he never could have come up with. On some level, had he maintained a firm control of the conversation. Instead of allowing a more open environment, he would have pursued his own line of thought, never realizing the different perspectives the inmates possessed based on their own existential experiences.

The third conversation focused on whether Jesus was destined or chose to make his sacrifice. What makes this conversation of interest is how, after debating questions such as whether Jesus needed to be clever should someone clever have tried to prevent him from fulfilling his purpose, the inmate apparently contacted Boghossian two weeks later saying he'd been thinking about the conversation, though with no particular conclusion. This inmate shows the Socratic Method's ability to engage participants morally and critically. Had Boghossian been in pursuit of student *conscientização*, the conversation could have moved to new questions and begun to introduce the connections between subjects such as from Jesus and his fate to the ideas of fate and destiny in our own lives and how our views on these ideas influence our individual approaches to the world.

In the context of inmate rehabilitation, it has already been shown that the Socratic Method can accomplish what MRT and R&R intend. With the addition of *conscientização*, approaches to dialogue, and the ideas of the empowering pedagogy which generates it, future rehabilitation efforts can hope to help a prisoner navigate the world through moral and critical reasoning. Such metacognition, similar to that accomplished in the Socratic Method, is an extension in the functioning of Freirean dialogue itself. Continuing with the words of Linda Best, "[...] through dialogue, students' knowledge is not only exposed, but challenged" (7). With a teacher facilitating the conversation so that student thought is the focus, what the students think, believe, and know is brought to the center of the conversation and challenged by the simple exchange of multiple views on a matter. Such exchanges can allow their views to broaden and become increasingly critical, potentially resulting in action.

A significant amount of research and time has been put into MRT and R&R. It would be foolhardy to suggest throwing out the progress that has been made in criminal

rehabilitation and cognitive therapy, as many of the methods clearly have merit. Alternatively, a fusion of the ideas in these contemporary methods along with Freire's ideas on pedagogy could find even greater results. Boghossian took the first step in demonstrating how Socratic Dialogue effectively accomplished the same goals cognitive therapy worked towards; Freire's ideas clarify that approach and its goals through new perspectives on old methods. The goal of this sort of education is to aid inmates in developing critical and moral reasoning while also helping them locate their experiences in a greater context. Accordingly, they can begin to improve their position in the world as their perception of that position and the influences which created it change – resulting in action upon those influences. Much like the prisoners in Plato's Allegory, upon coming to understand the sun as the source of all they had experienced, the prisoners can begin to make a greater impact in their own lives and those of their peers.

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