

Juvenile Offenders as Philosophers

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'This really does my head in' summed up Richard's feelings at the end of a community of inquiry. The content of the inquiry had ranged across problems of the definition of a 'table' and the nature of space and time. But Richard said that he had enjoyed having his head done in, even though the painful look on his face expressed the discomfort that can accompany thinking about and around concepts and definitions.

Richard is one of a small group of juvenile offenders (aged between 15 and 18) whom I have been working with for over a year in a unit for those young men who have committed what the law describes as 'grave' crimes. These are crimes in which serious violence is used, very often resulting in the young men being convicted of murder. They normally have a history of poor educational achievement that will include exclusion from school for disruption and violence against teachers.

The English Prison Service core educational curriculum centres upon the skills of literacy, numeracy, IT, and an umbrella term 'Social and Life Skills' covering such subjects as 'Citizenship' and 'Family Relationships'. Offenders are also expected to take courses such as 'Offending Behaviour' and 'Anger Management' in order to look at the causes of their previous criminal behaviour. It is clear then that using Philosophical Inquiry (PI) in a prison environment can explicitly serve at least two major purposes. It can develop intellectual abilities as well as foster behavioural change.

There is a constraint under which any part of the educational programme has to operate: we must always work towards nationally accredited qualifications. Any passing inspector's eye will look to see how any session that is being taught fits into this accreditation framework. Thus, I decided to develop a programme of Philosophical Inquiry largely within the Critical Thinking classes that lead to the Advanced Subsidiary (AS)¹ qualification offered by the OCR examination board.²

Analysing Anger through Philosophical Investigation

¹ The AS-level is normally taken by 17 year-olds who are following a course of advanced studies between the ages of 16-18.

² OCR is the acronym of the Oxford, Cambridge and Royal Society of Arts examinations board. OCR is one of the main British examination boards.

Though the novels that Matthew Lipman has produced for PI have been criticised for their lack of literary sparkle, I have found both *Mark*³ and *Lisa* useful for generating significant philosophical discussion. The passage in *Mark* where Mark gets angry in the school library has led to some significant dialogues. An example from our sessions will illustrate this significance.

The first is a small sample from a discussion of the notion of 'anger'. Michael had come up with the question 'Where does anger come from?'

RvdBB Do you want to clarify what sort of thing you're thinking about with that question?

Michael It's just that anger sort of comes from in your head but it comes from outside as well when people make you angry.

John But it's only in your head because of what other people have done.

Michael But you can't say that the anger's come from the other people. The anger's still coming from inside your head.

RvdBB So can anger come from inside your head without other people being involved?

(After some discussion of what this might mean, Tony put the question concisely.)

Tony Like being angry with yourself?

John But that still could be because of what other people have done.

Richard No, you could be angry with yourself even if nobody else's involved. Like when I was giving up burn

³ *Mark* is concerned with what Lipman has called 'Social Enquiry'. The characters in the book engage in various dialogues on (and get into situations which illustrate) social themes including the nature of democracy, government, justice, freedom, and community. Philosophical questions such as 'What is human nature?' are also considered.

[smoking/tobacco], and I still had one. That was just me, and I was still angry.

RvdBB That's an interesting example, Richard. Are there any other examples where we might be angry with ourselves when nobody else is involved?

Tony When you've said something to somebody and it's made them upset. Like when I shout at my Mum and she gets upset, and it's not her fault, and then I'm angry with myself.

Steven But you were angry to start with when you shouted at her.

Tony Yes, but the second anger wasn't anything to do with anybody except me. It was in my head.

Richard So anger in the end always comes from in your head.

RvdBB Why do you say that, Richard?

Richard Because even if it's other people that make you angry, it's still you that's got to be angry. It's still up to you if you're angry or not.

RvdBB So we can choose whether or not to be angry?

Michael Only sometimes. I mean, if somebody does something that's really bad, like hurting your sister, then you'd have to get them.

RvdBB You'd *have* to be angry?

Michael Of course you would. You'd have no choice. Nobody would.

Tony Unless you're stupid.

RvdBB So with other types of anger, can we choose whether or not to be angry?

Michael You could still be angry but not show it.

Tony Or not do anything about it?

Richard But you'd still be angry. What Roy's asking is can we choose whether or not we're angry. Can we switch it on and off?

John I don't know. I suppose people can. But it might be easier to switch it off than not to switch it on. Like I'll get angry in the gym when I get fouled. But I stop being angry because I'll end up being banged up if I get into a fight about it. So I wouldn't switch it on but I can switch it off.

Richard Only sometimes...

As can be seen, this discussion covers many points that can be described as philosophical. The point about being able to control one's anger because of the unwelcome consequences of expressing it is one that Plato examined in *The Republic*. In essence, John's point about being able to control his anger in the gym is similar to the example that Socrates gives about the self-controlling Odysseus.⁴ (Plato: 440-441) Similarly, Richard's example about being angry with himself over his giving in to smoking is also examined by Socrates:

'And don't we often see a man whose desires are trying to force him to do something his reason disapproves of cursing himself and getting indignant with them?' (Plato, 440)

In a subsequent discussion in which the example of Leontion giving in to his curiosity about looking at the executed corpses was mentioned to them, they were impressed by the mocking tones that Leontion used against himself

'There you are, curse you - a lovely sight! Have a real good look!' (Plato, 440)

Richard thought that Leontion had caught the flavour of self-directed anger particularly well.

'It's just like when you've had your burn and you think "Well done you stupid bastard. Now you've got to start again."

In this small sample of dialogue, it can be noted that other philosophical points appear. There is, for example, the case presented by Michael concerning justified anger (which is given as a sort of rational

⁴ Plato commends the example of Odysseus in his calling 'his heart to order'. In the passage from *The Odyssey* referred to by Plato, Odysseus tries to control his anger and emotions when he sees what has been happening in his palace during his long absence. The desire for instant revenge is rejected by calling 'his heart to order'. This phrase illustrates well for Plato the important distinction between 'the power to reflect about good and evil' and 'unreasoning passion'.

anger by Tony's point). There is also Richard's conceptual clarification of the point about whether or not we can choose to be angry.

This sample of dialogue is therefore a good example of how easily a group of young men can engage in philosophical inquiry, by identifying philosophical problems and by a process of example, counter-example, and conceptual clarification seeking to arrive at a better understanding.

The dialogue continued towards an answer to the original question of 'Where does anger come from?' The session produced the conclusion that 'because anger comes from your brain, sometimes it can be controlled and sometimes it can't, just like you can't always control whether or not you're happy or sad.' (On the way, we had met the question as to whether some people are 'naturally' angrier than others just as some people are 'naturally' more happy or sad than others.) Philosophy and psychology met in a fruitful dialogue.

The subsequent use of the Leontion example (which, because it deals with corpses and execution, was particularly interesting for my boys) highlights the considerable potential of sometimes using material from original philosophical texts within the PI sessions (and, of course, in others). A few thousand years might separate Socrates from Richard but both understand something of the nature of self-directed anger. They could have a useful dialogue about it.

Analysing blame through dialogue

Another sample of a dialogue inspired by *Mark* deals with the problems of blame and responsibility. When Mark is taken before Judge Bertoia⁵, the question of responsibility for actions is very relevantly (for my boys) highlighted. When Mark seems to be retreating into a defence that he is a 'victim of society', the judge thunders back at the teacher (Ms Williams) who tries to defuse the situation.

Practically every young person who comes in here tells me the same story. They all claim to be 'victims of society.' But what does that *mean*? That society has *attacked* them? How can that be? ... There's something else that bothers me. Muggings! Vandalism! They make no sense! I can understand their robbing someone, but why beat them up? I can understand stealing property, but why should anyone just want to destroy it?

I'm sure there are resentments - Ms Williams began.

⁵ Mark has been accused of having vandalised his school (wrongly accused as it turns out).

'Of course there are resentments!' the judge snorted. 'But what causes them? Why do these young people feel *outside* society - as if they're not part of it? Why do they think society's laws don't apply to them? Are they in any way different from the rest of us?' (Lipman, 1980: 12-13)

It's pretty clear that my boys would have both questions and answers to a passage like this. Some of the questions that came up were

1. Is a victim never guilty?
2. If you don't agree with the law, should you have to obey it?
3. Why shouldn't rich people have some of their property taken off them?
4. Does society give everybody the same chances?
5. Can Mark be seen as not being to blame for what he is accused of because of the things that had happened to him?

Each of these questions had considerable potential. The first was something that had a particular resonance for some of them, in that the person they had committed the crime against might well have been active in the process that led to the crime. (They were also very intrigued by the possibility of a person being mugged being at least in part responsible for allowing themselves to be mugged. (Yalom, 1980: 256-257) The second has a particular relevance to the perception of the use of drugs which some of them have. But they decided to look at the last of these questions partly because it was very much the theme of the story at this point and also because it raised so many other questions.

Mark had been through a difficult time prior to the allegation that he had smashed things up at his school. He had heard that his mother's company was going to relocate, necessitating a move for the family and provoking Mark to complain about 'This stupid society!'; his girlfriend had told him that she was going out on a date with another boy; he had had an argument in the school library.

The dialogue went off in interesting directions.

RvdBB So the question we're going to look at is whether, because various things had happened to Mark, he wasn't to blame for what he did at the school. Richard, do you want to say anything more about your question?

Richard Well, it's just that if these things hadn't happened, then he wouldn't have smashed things up in the school.

- He'd have been watching the game instead.
- Michael You don't know that. He could -
- Richard Of course you know that. That's the point. He was angry, so he smashed things up. He wasn't normally like that.
- Michael OK, but you've just done a *post hoc* and you can't do that. [It need to be stressed, in case this sounds artificial, that my young men love the technical language of Critical Thinking and use it whenever they can.] He was angry, so he smashed things up. You've just begged the question.⁶
- Richard But there must be some sort of link. I mean, it's obvious.
- RvdBB If you think that Mark's behaviour can be explained by the things that had happened to him, is that the same as saying that Mark wasn't to blame for what he did?
- Richard I'm not sure... I don't know.
- Tony Mark had a choice. He *could* have just watched the game. He could have just gone home. He was feeling pissed off, but he still didn't have to do it.
- John But he would have watched the game if he hadn't felt pissed off.
- Tony It's not like he was out of his head. He hadn't had anything⁶. He was just angry.
- John And we've already talked about being able to control your anger.
- Tony So, just because these things had happened, doesn't mean that he had no choice.
- Steven Did he have less choice though? You know, he was angry so he couldn't choose in the same way.
- Tony That's shit. You've either got choice or you haven't. Like I've either got a burn or I haven't.
- Steven You could have half a burn. Or ten. Or a quarter of one.
- RvdBB That's an interesting point. Can we have what we could call degrees of choice?
- Tony Like what?
- RvdBB Well, is it right to say that someone from Peckham has got the same choice about crime as someone from, say, Suffolk?
- Tony They've got the same choice. There's no difference.
- Richard No they haven't. Not if you think about crap schools and no jobs and no money.
- Steven So somebody in Suffolk's got a full packet, and somebody in Peckham's got only half a burn.

This analogy was pursued with some vigour, and a tentative conclusion was reached that choice (and thus responsibility) was in part determined by the context in which the choice was made. Roman Frister's choice to steal a cap to save his life in Auschwitz (which they were intrigued by) was a different sort of choice to steal than stealing a purse from an old lady. The events preceding what seemed to be Mark's choice to smash up the school were in this way relevant to his actions. But, to a man, they all saw Mark as responsible for what he did, as someone who could be blamed for what he did. They liked Judge Bertioia's scathing clarification of the term 'victims of society' as 'that society has *attacked* them?'

One of the interesting aspects of this sample of dialogue is the way in which the participants seek to clarify what is being said in order to arrive at a better understanding of the issues. The *post hoc* explanation which Michael identified usefully cut through the vagueness of the social determinism argument. The distinction between identifying precedents and locating responsibility for choice made by Tony continued this. The notion of quantities of choice was also a fruitful one.

The value of third-person narrative in Philosophical Inquiry

⁶ In other words, he hadn't taken any drugs that might have affected his behaviour.

What these small samples of dialogue also illustrate is that using third-person narratives creates what I would see as 'safe' explorations of potentially difficult areas of analysis. The difficulty is not just in the sense of their complexity, but also in terms of their personal implications. Courses which deal with what is called 'Offending Behaviour' require that the individual addresses their own behaviour, that they seeks to explain it, and that they are critical of it. One of the techniques that is used is to get the prisoner to tell the story of their crime in cartoon form, and then ask them to go through the narrative. This has some potential, but it runs the risk of distortion of the narrative through deliberate misrepresentation of their (and others') role in the narrative.

Third person narratives on the other hand do not have this risk. Things are happening to other people, and there is little or no threat to reputation or previous accounts of oneself by taking up a position in relation to these things and people. An example from one of our sessions illustrates the point well. We were using the story 'The Fight' from Philip Cam's *Thinking Stories* 3.⁷ This provides scope for discussion of when fighting is justified (although the fight that the characters Neil and Josh get into is a very mild affair).

It was Richard who showed that this sort of narrative approach enables my young men to step back and to take up a philosophical position.

'Neil shouldn't have got into the fight. He should've just walked away. It didn't do any good. It wasn't worth having a fight for. I would've, but he shouldn't.'

This highlights a very significant point. The Lipman and Cam material enable my young men to give reasons for actions, to justify decisions, without there being a threat to their image or status. Richard's distinction between Neil who 'shouldn't have got into the fight' and himself 'I would've' preserves the image but still makes the point.

All of this, of course, raises the central question of transfer. Are my PI sessions no more than brief flashes of interesting thinking which have no significance for either intellectual or moral development? I am happy to admit that more work needs to be done in order to answer this question. (And I have plans to do this work.) With regard to intellectual development, I can report that all of the boys except one passed their AS in

⁷ In *The Fight*, two boys Neil and Josh have a fight with an Aboriginal boy, and the short story centres upon moral and social issues arising from this incident. Such questions as 'Was it worse to have fought an Aborigine?' (as Josh's mother suggests it was), 'Is it right for two boys to fight one?', and 'Can we justify fighting on the basis of provocation?' arise in and from the narrative.

Critical Thinking. Given their previous educational background, this was very impressive (especially in that it was for nearly all of them the first examination they had ever taken). In addition, when Steven asked me to look at some work that he'd done without being asked, and he handed over a page of inductive and deductive arguments that he'd been coming up with 'just so that he's sure of the difference', then something interesting is happening. The transfer to moral development is something that needs further investigation.⁸ However, there is already interesting research showing the value of third-person narrative material with juvenile offenders. (The Citizenship Foundation has recently carried out some evaluation of their 'Smart Thinking' programme that shows promising results.)

There is also the point about the value of including a PI component in a Critical Thinking course. I have described elsewhere how my boys took to Critical Thinking with enormous enthusiasm (van den Brink-Budgen, 2001). What I hope is also obvious is that they took to 'doing' philosophy with a similar excitement. They saw the two activities as largely the same thing, except that Critical Thinking had more unequivocally right or wrong answers (for such argument-structure questions as 'What is the conclusion of this argument?' and 'What is the flaw in the argument?') But the biggest pay-off in having PI within Critical Thinking was the confidence the boys developed in evaluating arguments. They could happily construct alternative explanations and scenarios; they could ask 'What if...?' about anything; they could look for consistency or the lack of it by filling in the content of 'if...then'; they could unpack definitions; they could examine criteria. They could therefore bring an imaginative richness to their Critical Thinking, by *wanting* to be philosophical. The example of Steven with his inductive/deductive argument shows an important feature of PI with my juvenile offenders. This is the lack of self-consciousness about thinking and talking about philosophical matters. (Even the word 'philosophy' gives them pleasure.) They will take delight in worrying about the definition of a table, the nature of time and space, whether or not we are 'real', the dilemmas of moral choices, the nature of friendship, and so on. And they can be alarmingly dismissive of false dilemmas. Faced with the classic prisoner's dilemma, they solved it in a

⁸ There is a growing range of evaluative literature on the use of discussions of third-person scenarios and dilemmas in order to promote the growth of moral development with offenders, especially coming from psychologists. Examples include Arbuthnot and Gordon 1986, Donnelly et al. 2001, and Gibbs et al. 1984. There is a useful discussion of the difficulties of evaluation and assessment of PI in Splitter and Sharp, 147-155.

few seconds by pointing out that 'you never grass'. Whatever the circumstances, you don't do it. In this age of relative morality, it is comforting to find a moral absolute.

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