

## Sophia in the System:

### Why a Philosophy Major is Necessary for Prisoners

by Mikhail Markhasev

Man does not live by bread alone, but also by ideas, which have consequences. Many of us in prison have not thought through the consequences of our actions, and are spending years -- if not a lifetime -- behind bars because of an unexamined life. Criminality is an outward symptom of a failed worldview, an unresolved existential crisis which oozes character defects and harmful actions. Gang membership, drug addiction, or a cycle of other uncontrolled urges, are the poisonous fruit of inward seeds. A failure to adequately define healthy values and identity, to choose a worthy purpose, is what often perpetuates the constricting cycle of impulsive acts, mental instability, and irrational behavior. This is why CDCR's rehabilitative programs cultivate self-awareness, informed decision-making, and purposeful behavior. But such programming is forced and mandated, therefore limited in effectiveness. On site college classes, on the other hand, are voluntary and a college degree is an important tool against recidivism. Bakerfield College's (BC) program at the California State Prison in Corcoran is a great incentive for us to succeed. Besides, there is a "Trojan Horse" in BC's academic arsenal, which can help crack the citadel of entrenched criminality. This secret weapon is philosophy.

On the first day of class, I learned that philosophy does not mean "study of ideas," but is literally, "love of wisdom." In Greek, wisdom is "sophia," which is synonymous with insight or discernment about oneself: one's motives and actions, and the ability to navigate through the choppy sea of life. From "sophia" we extract "phronimos," which is prudence, along with "sophizo," which is instruction. These terms dictate our relations with others

and responses to circumstances.

The Board of Prison Hearings (BPH) calls these tenets insight, responsibility, and remorse, and looks for these pillars of practical wisdom in inmates who seek release into free society. From our institutional self-help groups and BPH prep classes, we know that if the parole board finds someone "unsuitable" for release, it is usually because he or she lacks one of these key aspects of comprehensive rehabilitation.

The themes discussed in our class this semester could have been plucked from BPH prep workshops. Philosophy allows students an overview of the big picture along with personal application of eternal truths. Although it was a rigorous course on logic, our professor encouraged us to contemplate and comment on the given quotes and topics, all of which were critical for insight into oneself and one's actions:

- \* What does it mean to live an authentic life?
- \* "An unexamined life is not worth living."
- \* Importance of clarity in expression
- \* "Nothing is so difficult as not deceiving oneself."
- \* "He who thinks great thoughts, often makes great errors."
- \* Role of self-love
- \* Dangers of leaning on logic only
- \* The problem of disagreement
- \* Meaning of life
- \* Favorite quote
- \* Problem of freedom/free will
- \* Difficulty of apprehending truth

Glancing over this list, these are the questions I never asked in the free world, and which many of us don't bother asking even after landing in prison. Yet life demands answers to questions we fail to ask, and they are often answered at the expense of others. In our philosophy class, I must face assigned questions and consider what is easily ignored or neglected. Whether or not I apply myself is another matter.

Our philosophy curriculum not only forced the questions, but provided an appropriate, **unforced forum** for constructive discussion. A college classroom setting allows a degree of decompression that is unduplicated elsewhere in prison. At the same time, philosophy shares common threads with other groups. "An examined life" is exactly what is stressed in every Twelve Step curriculum, and in cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), both of which are permanent staples of prisoner recovery. I have also borrowed quotes from the philosophy class for my other weekly groups, since the need to define values, purpose, meaning, and correct understanding of success and happiness are vital to everything from drug recovery to BPH preparation.

Granted, philosophy is not a silver bullet for recidivism any more than books on dieting and healthy lifestyles are guarantees of good health. But, it is a necessary foundation for everyone seeking complete restoration, or to become a substance abuse counselor and a peer mentor in prison. It is important to understand why we do what we do. An academic course which does more than fill up our heads with information is a great step toward healing both the head and the heart.

When considering the unique predicament of long-term incarceration, is there a more appropriate curriculum, than the one which focuses on critical thinking, introspection, contemplation, and examination of valuable perspectives and concepts which have direct application to one's life in

prison? If in the outside world one's purpose is defined by who one is and what he does, in prison, one must experience a profound transformation from who he is, into what he ought to be. Philosophy meets the challenge on an academic level, through acquired knowledge and earned credits, but also by promoting an examined life. A criminal's specialty is cruising through life with blinders tightly strapped. Exposure to classic texts and eternal truths means allowing a ray of sunlight into a dusty room of wilfull ignorance.

California prisons are divided between so-called "active" and "sensitive needs" yards, each housing prisoners according to their case classification, gang affiliation, and housing criteria. Although this distinction initially intended to separate general population inmates from those in protective custody, over the past two decades that line has blurred, with the majority of in-house murders committed on "sensitive needs" facilities, rather than active mainlines.

When introducing the philosophy courses on active gang yards, it is a powerful testimony of doing things differently in a place where a strict gang structure enforces the tenets of the convict code. There, a basic syllogism prevails: since society is corrupt, then the cops are also corrupt; therefore, it doesn't matter if I play by my own rules. The first work we read this semester was Plato's Apology of the Death of Socrates, a philosopher who was executed for doing what was right. Socrates refused to wrong others or respond with violence. This infusion of virtue is not how things go down in a it's-either-you-or-me arena of prison politics. But philosophy allows this voice to be heard as a breath of truth in a suffocating environment where dissent is forcefully discouraged. Even after two millenia, the voice of Socrates echoes in a most unlikely cave.

On Sensitive Needs Yards (SNY) and Non-Designated Programming

Facilities (NDPF), where the ratio of gang dropouts, sex offenders, and inmates in the care of mental health services is much higher, philosophy provides a much needed scale of meaning, after whatever else life entailed has been scrapped by the barren reality of an existential vacuum. What is a drop out from gangs dropping into? If his past is now crossed out, what will be the foundation of a new life? This philosophical question will be answered one way or another through daily decisions. At this point, however, philosophy provides a plethora of choices and a field of options because it is organically linked to morals, mathematics, communication, critical thinking, religion, and history. A given moral basis for informed decision-making is taken and applied in other branches of knowledge.

Availability of a philosophy degree, may not be the cure for criminality, but it is definitely a pathway toward healing. There is no reason why it cannot be offered alongside the already available associate degrees in other fields? In or out of prison, each man is forced to be a philosopher on a journey which he must traverse on his own. The possibility to major in philosophy provides the prisoner a sturdy staff to help him along the way. After all, especially in prison man is reminded that he is a being in search of meaning.