

What is Philosophy in Prison? George Eliot and the Search for Moral Insight

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Abstract: *I argue in this article that people in prison make excellent philosophers, for reasons related to what they are deprived of. I also suggest that great novels constitute, or at the very least, introduce us to, philosophy. Some of the deepest questions about human life can be addressed by fusing philosophical thinking with empirical research in prisons. Prisoners talk with depth and insight about what it is to feel human, what matters most in human experience, and the importance of the ‘vibrations of fellow feeling’.*

Keywords: *prison, humanity, research, philosophy, authentic description*

Introduction

The core ethical question becomes how human relations can expand and empower individuals’ capacities, instead of diminishing them (Carlisle, 2019, pp. 45-46, on Spinoza).

As George Eliot, she would see her work as a novelist as “unravelling” ... the “mystery” of moral life (Carlisle, 2019, p. 33).

How do we find our bearings in this complex and turbulent life? What kinds of encounters and relationships expand or diminish our capacities? What if answers to these questions can be found by fusing philosophical thinking with empirical research? Abstract ideas must apply to real, complex lives if they are to have meaning and value. Philosophical novelists labour in this territory, putting ideas to work in their depictions of common human struggles. Their ideas derive from many sources, so they are digested and developed, rather than translated, with empathy and imagination (see Gatens, 2019). I witnessed the relevance of philosophical ideas in the real world in my work, doing applied research, in prisons. Something about investigating prison suicide and suicide attempts made concepts of meaning and survivability critical. I found, in brief, that suicides are more likely in dehumanising prisons (Liebling, 2006). The very word *dehumanising* denotes a denial of our human-ness, raising key questions about what that human-ness *is*. Prisoners talk with depth and insight about what it is to feel human, as I illustrate below. I argue in this article that people in prison make excellent philosophers, for reasons related to what they are deprived of. I also suggest that great novels constitute, or at the very least, introduce us to, philosophy. Inevitably, then, I suggest that teaching philosophy in prison is a deeply valuable and meaningful exercise. Others are beginning to make this case in interesting and convincing ways (Szifris, 2021; West, 2022).

My interest in philosophy developed out of a love of literature, although I barely noticed the philosophers' voices in the novels of Eliot, Camus, Dostoyevsky, and Tolstoy when I first read them. I appreciated the fact that these novelists were great moral thinkers, but that recognition was latent and subdued. My response to their writing was emotional: I fell in love. This made me love *life* which – as a troubled teenager – was significant. If 'philosophy arises naturally out of the human condition' (Nagel, 1989), then literature provided deep and compelling accounts of that human condition in all its tragedy and complexity. Later, I found political philosophy by far the most intellectually exciting part of my politics degree. Moral philosophy eventually became an important companion in my search, with others, to conceptualise and measure the quality of prison life. We were trying to do justice to *concepts that matter*, and to understand, as precisely as we could, how these concepts-in-action were relevant to human experience. Philosophy is, after all, 'a subject that gets right to the heart of what matters' (Warburton, 2021). I noticed early on that prisoners got to the heart of the matter rather easily (Liebling, with Arnold, 2004).

Philosophical ideas helped make sense of what the data kept showing over a professional lifetime of prisons research: that what helps us to survive and flourish are 'the virtues': kindness, relationships with others, respect and recognition, trust, and a legitimate form of order. This is demonstrated starkly in prison, for reasons I outline below, but it is (I, and others claim) also true in general. George Eliot was my favourite author, and now (in a project that is ongoing) I have the luxury of working out how uncannily her ideas and my prisons research data coincide. As Philip Davis (2017a), her intellectual biographer, said:

'If you want to read literature that sets out to create a holding ground for raw human material—for human struggles, difficulties, and celebrations—read George Eliot'.

The key novels for me were *Mill on the Floss*, *Adam Bede*, *Scenes of Clerical Life*, *Daniel Deronda* and *Middlemarch*, of which Philip Davis says:

You've got the most powerful working model in fiction of what human life is like. It's as if somehow George Eliot has found the building blocks—the DNA—of existence (2017a).

In George Eliot's case, each novel constitutes a demonstration of her synthetic philosophical thinking: that human relationships have causal effects, that our minds have a huge capacity to be affected by relations with others; and that they are almost 'sacred' in their significance: what Clare Carlisle calls 'a philosophy of encounter and transformation' (2019, p. 601). This 'truth' has emerged in every research project I have carried out, as long as I stayed as close as possible to feeling and experience: I learned that human vibrations really matter in prison. This insight lies at the heart of George Eliot's humanistic philosophy.

George Eliot's thinking had been shaped by her translations, and therefore close readings of, the works of Strauss, Feuerbach and Spinoza, as well as other great thinkers of her time. Through her translations of their ideas, and their carefully constructed presentations in literature ('experiments in life'), she made them relevant. These philosophers of human experience help explain what makes most prison environments barely survivable, but also what makes a few, manageable. We need respect, recognition, kindness, order and justice like we need oxygen (but we need to be precise about the meaning-in-practice of these words). Returning to George Eliot, and the writers who influenced her, is helping me to organise ongoing empirical work 'in the service of human life' (Davis, 2017b). The ideas were there all along, but carefully collected empirical data supports them. I illustrate this with some examples below.

There are four dimensions to this relationship between George Eliot's work and findings from prisons research that I want to touch on in this article:

1. George Eliot's language, and understanding, of 'the vibrations of fellow feeling';

2. Her linking of the abstract with the concrete; of truth residing in individual lives;
3. Her concept of the fundamental, and the links between the grasping of this moral impulse, or the existential force of morality, and the experience of loss; and
4. Her concept of authentic description and its moral purpose.

I will address each of these briefly.

1. The Vibrations of Fellow Feeling

In an early study of the work of prison officers and their relationships with prisoners a colleague and I described a typical disciplinary hearing (known as an adjudication), in a well-functioning prison. We said:

During adjudications we sometimes witnessed a kind of ‘togetherness’ as staff and prisoners responded – knowing the full implications – to a verdict or award of the adjudicating governor. (Liebling & Price, 1999, p. 16)

This was a ‘meeting’ – a scene in the intimate dynamics of power and exchange that take place routinely, though very differently, in prison. When they work well, officers recognise prisoners, feel their moods, and understand the impact of decisions on them. Good prison officers adjust their behaviour accordingly, using discretion, and mercy, judiciously. What George Eliot calls the ‘vibrations of fellow feeling’, which are inseparable from uses of power in prison, keep people alive. She says ... ‘It is like a diffusion or expansion of one’s own life, to be assured that its vibrations are repeated in another ... ’ (Haight, 1954, in Davis, 2017a, p. 55). Human vibrations are a kind of ‘responsive action’, the presence of a soul, reverberating in sympathy to another soul. When a prison officer says, ‘put the knife down mate; just put it down’, the officer is drawing on knowledge acquired over time; seeds sown in social exchanges on and off the wing, the translation across differences into meaningful communication, acknowledgement or connection. He is *present* (it was a ‘he’ in this case). When this works, the miracle of order – a normative order – can be created on a wing (Liebling et al., 2010). When it fails, as it so often does, a spiral of antagonism, instability and despair follows. The contrast between ‘meetings’ and ‘un-meetings’ (see Buber’s *I-It, I-Thou* distinction, 2010), or presence and absence as colleagues and I have described it, makes up much of the ‘syntax of power’ in prison (see Crewe et al., 2014). The difference makes a prison ‘survivable’ or not survivable. This is a kind of moral grammar of our existence. As Buber put it, ‘All actual life is encounter’ (see Kramer, 2003, p. 21).¹ What is illustrated in George Eliot’s fiction, grounded in the abstract philosophy of her favourite thinkers, is acutely evident in prison. People only want to go on living when those around them treat them carefully (see, e.g. Liebling, 1992, 1999b). This is why power only works effectively, or legitimately, through relationships (see Liebling, 2000, 2011). Without *regard* we resist and rebel, or we perish.

2. The Abstract and the Concrete

My next point flows from the first and is about Eliot’s linking of the abstract with the concrete; of truth residing in individual lives. Below are two quotations from prisoners describing their experience to illustrate this. The first is talking about his experience of disrespect, when he arrived in prison. He says:

When I first came in, I had no pillow. I approached two officers – they were chatting, so I waited. Eventually, one of them asked me what I wanted. He said, ‘You’re not entitled to a pillow’ and carried on chatting. They were not concerned about me. That seems minor, but it’s crucial. *It can turn you into a different person.* (Prisoner, in Liebling, with Arnold, 2004)

This second describes its opposite: respect.

¹ This is also translated as ‘All real living is meeting’. The essence of this idea is that so much of what goes on in human life occurs in the sphere of ‘between’ (see Buber, 1938). Buber was, like Eliot, inspired by Feuerbach.

Respect, right? It's something about what I was saying with that cup of tea. An officer got me a cup of water at lock up so I could make myself one. *Someone wanted to recognise that I'm a person.* Do you know what I mean? (Prisoner)

The second participant identifies, phenomenologically, the content and importance of recognition to his well-being. Both get to the heart of the link between interpersonal treatment and the 'expanding or contracting of a life' (Davis, 2017b, p. 116) which takes place according to the ethical space around it. What is important here (and has emerged over and over again in my work) is that prisons differ morally, so we can explore these differences systematically. The life force is made visible – we can see it striving, failing, being supported or devastated in a measurable environment. Prisons provide us with 'felt ethics over theoretic politics' (Davis, p. 101) and with a direct route to moral concepts (like justice, dignity and recognition) in action. Apparently abstract norms can be recognized 'acting' in ordinary persons. Human beings 'shrink' and 'contract' 'like a nervous organism diminishing its life' when they are treated with indifference, carelessness or brutality (Davis, 2017b, pp. 202–204; and see Porporino, 2010). They survive, or grow and flourish, when they are treated decently.

Looking at the results from our 'moral climate surveys' (see further Liebling, 2012; Liebling et al., 2011) – which we developed using a methodology I refer to as 'ethnography-led measurement' – we find that indifferent, aggressive or unfair treatment can lead to higher levels of 'political charge' – anger and alienation as well as suicide and violence. Radicalization in prison is rare, but it becomes more likely where prisons look like 'failed states': where power works in illegitimate ways, moral vacuums arise, chaos and disorganisation exist (see Williams & Liebling, submitted). On the other hand, and here I am summarizing large and separate studies, exceptional, person-centred prisons in which justice and love can be found lead to better outcomes on all measures, including reconviction (Auty & Liebling, 2019). In the human struggle for life, mistreatment is toxic. We have strong evidence that the 'is' and the 'ought' are fused; moral facts are 'embedded in the substance of the social' (Fassin, 2015, p. 4).²

Because of the controlled nature of the environment, and because of its moral intensity, the particular and 'the real' are highly visible and can be linked to the general. We can 'think within the subject' rather than about it and observe '*the order and connection of things*', as Spinoza and Durkheim proposed. We find, at least in prison, that there are moral rules in the universe – that the essence of life is 'almost sacred' (Davis, 2017b), but the source of the almost sacredness is our selves (see also Scruton, 2014; Williams, 2018).

3. George Eliot's Concept of the Fundamental

For the third point, I want to use a quote, from *Janet's Repentance*:

Within the four walls where the stir and glare of the world are shut out, and every voice is subdued – where a human being lies prostrate, thrown on the tender mercies of his fellow, *the moral relation of man to man is reduced to its utmost clearness and simplicity: bigotry cannot confuse it, theory cannot pervert it, passion, awed into quiescence, can neither pollute nor perturb it.* As we bend over the sick-bed, all the forces of our nature rush towards the channels of pity, of patience, and of love, and sweep down the miserable choking drift of our quarrels, our debates, our would-be wisdom, and our clamorous selfish desires. This blessing of serene freedom from the importunities of opinion lies in all simple direct acts of mercy, and is often one source of that sweet calm which is often felt by the watcher in the sick room, even when the duties are of a hard and terrible kind. (Ch. 24, p. 308: emphasis added)

² I mean 'moral facts' as patterned, observable moral concepts that have explanatory significance: a form of naturalistic realism: if something is part of a genuine explanation of facts, it is appropriate to regard it as real (Sturgeon, 1985; Durkheim, 1893/2013). I am grateful to Jonathan Jacobs for continuing dialogue on this point. Fassin used the term 'questions', rather than facts, in his essay.

In the sick room, ‘near its end, human life [is] at its most minimal and yet fundamental’ ... Human beings encounter ‘the revelation of an irreducible, overwhelmingly primary reality’ (Davis, 2017b, p. 74). The basic moral grammar of humankind erupts ‘beyond the to-ing and fro-ing of intellectual doubt’ (p. 75). ‘This was overwhelmingly the thing itself’; human values, or virtues – ‘primitive love’ and ‘the need to be merciful or to receive mercy’ - become less uncertain or disguised from us; they have an existential force at the end of life. It is an almost religious feeling. What she says here, I had just experienced at my Father’s bedside. But I had also felt this for thirty years in prison.

Prisons, I realized, are, ‘next only to death’, using the term used by Sean McConville for the title of his book about *English Local Prisons* (1995) in their capacity to concentrate the mind on what it is to be human. Paradoxically, because of what they make so rare (freedom, love, and dignity), they are uniquely amenable settings for locating the fundamental. Imagine for a moment the experience of being given a life sentence with a tariff of 35 years at the age of 18. This has become increasingly the case as the common law of joint enterprise has been used to hold all of those at the scene, and sometimes beyond, responsible for knife crimes, for example (Crewe et al., 2016; Hulley et al., 2019). The existential challenge for prisoners facing such sentences are extraordinary. ‘For the first few years’, said one, ‘I was struggling with my emotions’ (in Liebling et al., 2011).

Once they emerge from the early stages of their catastrophic, ‘life-trashing’ sentences (Simon, 2001), prisoners become the ‘unlikely representatives of the primary ... and the fundamental’ (Davis, 2017b, p. 194) articulating, or making detectable, ‘the real’. The ‘raw material of moral sentiment’ (George Eliot Essays, p. 270, in Davis, 2017b, p. 201) is everywhere: the ‘right thing’ being felt, and expressed, in ‘the wrong place’ (Ibid, p. 202).

Counter-intuitively, being in, or even going to, a prison wakes up our moral imagination. There are good reasons for this. Prisoners talk with passion and clarity about ‘things that matter’. Existential questions become hard to avoid. There is a *moral intensity* to prison life, which is linked to the fact that they are places full of power and deprivation. Prisoners experience intense emotional responses to both. Patterns are discernible that make clear what is real and important about human social and moral life. Morality has ‘an existential force’ (p. 362) in places that feel like hell (Midgley, 2005) or where ‘death, suffering and misery’ are found (Monk, 1991, p. 137). Prisoners ‘know’ things, about sorrow, regret, abandonment, unfairness, violence, loneliness, humanity, and the significance of mercy. We know that suffering and the ‘acquisition of knowledge’ are often linked (Davis 2017a, p. 393). Imprisonment can force a realization of what is meaningful, or of what matters. Human needs are ‘wrought back’ into feeling, both as a result of ‘the crisis event’ – or deprivation of liberty – and because of the exposure to intensified or power-infused forms of interaction on a day-to-day basis. Suffering subtracts from and diminishes life, but it can reveal what it is that is lacking, or precipitate the struggle for life.

Paradoxically, this is where ‘the living energy’ or the pulse of life is at its most powerful. It becomes especially clear when a felt ‘lack’ of, for example, humanity, is momentarily relieved. Extreme contrast (absence and presence) makes the prison something like a ‘moral laboratory’ in which what matters comes clear, prisoners can help us to conceptualize and, in the end, measure this, and once we have done so, variations between establishments with different moral climates and practices are found to be clearly linked to ‘survival’ and other important outcomes. Of course, not all prisoners are opened up by the experience of imprisonment. This is linked to the fact that the opportunities available, as well as the social and moral climates, differ significantly, as do prisoners’ characters and emotional lives. Some harden and narrow, or are otherwise diminished and damaged, by imprisonment. I describe possibilities grounded in experience here, arguing that it is important to understand the differences between expansive/empowering environments and destructive ones. These differences, as both Spinoza and Eliot would argue, tend to be relational (see Auty & Liebling, 2019). Survivable prisons

are characterized by higher levels of mercy, kindness, humanity and respect (but also fairness, clarity and safety) than unsurvivable prisons. My work diagnoses prisons culturally and morally, and this is what we have found (Liebling, with Arnold, 2004).

4. Authentic Description and its Moral Purpose.

The final point I want to make here is about authentic description. I have written about this before, drawing on George Eliot (Liebling, 1999a) but have come to understand the significance of ‘faithful representation’ more deeply following a return research exercise in a prison I had once known very well. Ten years after I had first studied it, it was changed. For all sorts of reasons, trust had stopped flowing, and the opposite scenario from the adjudication I described earlier had become the norm. Prisoners and staff were distant, and meaningful communication had ceased. The prison was dangerously violent. It was very difficult to get people to talk openly about what was going on. We (a team of three) spent 18 months trying to get under the surface, and then we wrote a report (Liebling et al., 2011). Everybody misunderstood everybody else. We described the prison as ‘paralysed by distrust’. The research task of ‘getting the description right’ was getting harder, but so was the work task of creating a normative order in which ‘meetings’ between whole persons were possible. This was a post 9/11 high security prison; 40 per cent of its prisoners were Muslim. Half of that number had converted to Islam in prison. Fear and risk permeated the atmosphere. No-one was willing to ‘name the elephant in the room’ or talk about what was going on (Liebling, 2011, 2015a). Un-meetings and failures of seeing were creating violence. That fuller story is still to be written; the point here is how right George Eliot was that the very difficult task of ‘faithful representation’ has a deep moral purpose.

Philosopher Iris Murdoch captures this problem and all that is at stake here:

For Murdoch, the most crucial moral virtue was a kind of attentiveness to detail, a wise, trained capacity for vision, which could see what was really going on in a situation and respond accordingly ... For Murdoch, what so often keeps us from acting morally is not that we fail to follow the moral rules that tell us how to act; rather, it is that we *misunderstand the situation before us* [emphasis added]. When we describe the situation to ourselves, we simply get it wrong. (Jollimore, 2013, paras 16, 17)

As Eliot argued, the task of art and writing is ‘to enlarge the sympathies of others’; to understand, but also to promote understanding. She said:

‘the only effect I ardently long to produce by my writings, is that those who read them should be better able to imagine and to feel the pains and joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact of being struggling, erring human creatures’. (Haight, 1954, *The George Eliot Letters*: III, 111. 5 July 1859)

What Eliot called ‘*authentic representation*’ is something which has a moral value. It reminds us of the reality and dignity of all people, enlarging our sympathies and teaching through the experience of others. Enduring truths are based on real human feeling and experience.

The aim of prison scholarship, I argue, is authentic description; ‘to make the prison world “intelligible”; to make moral blindness less likely or possible’ ... and ‘to enlarge sympathies in ways that can reshape human consciousness and with it the structures of society’ (Liebling, 2015b, p. 30). We should try to be George Eliot in prison.

I argue in my work that what happens in prison can be seen as an intensified and highly visible version of what happens in human social environments more generally: the ways in which power flows and interpersonal relationships function shape outcomes. Order, safety, survival, and growth, in and out of prison, depend largely on what goes on between people. Like

human beings more generally, but in ways that can be clearly witnessed and described, prisoners need help, love and recognition if they are to ‘go on’. Lying at the intersection between the empirical, the normative and the conceptual, we find that human beings ‘shrink’ or they survive and or grow, according to the human vibrations around them – we come as close to the ‘sources of the basically human’ as it is possible to be.

My conclusions, then, as are follows. First, George Eliot shows us that human character develops and changes according to our relations to and treatment by others. We are works in progress: dynamic and emergent. We can be made, or destroyed, by other people. There are always possibilities for transformation and growth, but they are shaped mostly by interpersonal encounters, or our moral environment. One of the consequences of this position is that we should not draw firm conclusions about a person’s character or risk, or their trustworthiness/un-trustworthiness, as if these are fixed, but should keep our minds open to the realities of change (Ashton, 2019; Williams & Liebling, submitted). Of course, we should also avoid wishful thinking and ‘comforting illusions’ (see Gatens, 2019, p. 238). Uncertainty and open-mindedness are necessary to our capacity for moral and intellectual judgment. More generally, George Eliot proposed that there is a moral reality to the universe. I find myself engaged in a long-term empirical project that strongly supports her case.

Secondly, the minds of others form part of this moral universe. Authors transform us too. Encounters with ideas – ‘the relations of one mind to another’ (Fleishman, 2011) – lead to discovery and the formation or expansion of identity. We found something like this in a recent study of the meaning and impact of Shared Reading in prison in which reading aloud in groups over time improved ratings on dimensions like ‘confidence and agency’ and ‘being myself’ (Liebling et al., 2021). The cultivation of sensibility and thinking in dialogue with other minds has value, whether those minds are writers or living companions. We can find love, recognition, companionship and the seeds for growth in books as well as in other people.

Thirdly, as criminologists, prison scholars, and human beings, we should be open to all that philosophy and literature have to offer. Saunders shows, in his ‘Four Russians’ study, how fiction ‘changes the way we think about ourselves’ (Saunders, 2021, p. 215):

Reading “Master and Man” we begin living it; the words disappear, and we find ourselves thinking not about word choice but about the decisions the characters are making and decisions we have made, or might have to make someday, in our actual lives. (Saunders, 2021, p. 221)

When we are moved by an individual story, we understand the moral universe more clearly. Perhaps this is especially true of nineteenth century literature, ‘which told us about people’s emotions in staggering depth and revealed the most carefully hidden secrets of human nature’ (Altan, 2019, p. 175). Through feeling, and narrative, we grasp things; we pay ‘ethical attention’ (Nussbaum, 1990, p. iv). Drawing on George Eliot, I have argued before that:

The significance of the particular and the careful consideration of the general are equally relevant to ‘faithful representation’. *Human feeling* is a chief agent of realist research. In other words, our emotions do not need to be reconciled with our so-called data. They *constitute* data. They require critical reflection and triangulation, and ‘faithful representation’, but not selective inattention.’ (Liebling, 1999a, pp. 162-163)

Something about the prison experience, brutal as it is, generates, or is soothed by, philosophical insight. Suffering, injustice and degradation are harms to be avoided, but they ‘force the soul to cry out “why”?’ (Weil, tr. Doering, 2012, p. 66). Talking about philosophy in prison draws out different, perhaps more existential, dimensions of the lived experience from ‘standard’ accounts of needs and pains (words that can limit as well as invite). Philosophical dialogue encourages the cultivation of moral perception and sensitivity, or invites ‘moral imagination’ (Nussbaum, 1990, p. 45) in ways that can shape lives, both in and out of prison.

There is growing evidence from many studies of the positive effects of teaching philosophy and literature in prison (e.g. Szifris, 2021 and this volume).³

Philosophy helps us to think, to know, and to live. We might encounter it through literature, philosophy classes, theatre, or other means (philosophical thinking underpins some cognitive behavioural courses, however lost that notion has become), with somewhat different meanings and effects, but however we encounter and engage with it, it helps us to test our assumptions, tackle our distortions, affirm what is best in us, uncover meaning, and grow. Our cognitive, emotional and moral progress is intertwined (Goldstein, 2020). That people in prison often find philosophy inspiring and relevant tells us a great deal: there are ‘deep questions at stake’ (Carlisle, 2019, p. 599) which are relevant to our struggle to live manageable lives.

³ One of many fortunate events in my own journey – a key privilege of my professional teaching role – was encountering Kirstine Szifris and feeling excitement as her MPhil and PhD supervisor when she began to formulate her plan to teach philosophy in prison. I am delighted that she is now leading and publishing work in this field.

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