

Doing Good For Bad Done: The Debate Over Correctional Education

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There appear to be two separate arguments under this one subject. The first argument is that offering educational programs for criminals is, in effect, creating smarter criminals. It is a very tough argument to debate, to say the least. However, exactly what makes this argument so tough to oppose is exactly what will undo the argument. The second argument is essentially a question: Why should we do good things for those who have done bad things?

So, to the first argument: The developing mind of a criminal is just that – the developing of a criminal mind. It makes sense: the smarter the mechanic, the more competent at mechanical know-how he is. But one could argue that this conclusion is true only if the mechanic's development were in a mechanical field. The mechanic would not be a more competent mechanic if he were educated in, say, quilting. However, our quilting mechanic will have developed better critical thinking skills, which in turn will have offered him the ability to learn with greater efficiency, therefore endangering the public with a more competent quilting-mechanic. So the argument does have some backbone. What makes this argument so difficult to debate is that it is absolutely impossible to prove that a criminal who has developed his mind has not merely developed a more sophisticated criminal mind. But where do we find any data to support that argument? It is not as though the assumed criminal lifestyle is charted and monitored. We are left to our assumptions, and why would we assume otherwise? So the heart of this argument is assumption. Two assumptions split us into two categories: some of us believe that man is basically "good," and some of us believe that man is basically "evil." To assume that a criminal's developing mind is a developing criminal mind, we must assume that the very nature of every criminal is crime, and that the only possible change in a criminal's behavior can be new criminal behavior. We have never met this person, talked with this person, or even come within range of this person, and yet we are able to draw these grand conclusions about this person. How?

My logic tells me that the only possible way to assume such a conclusion about a person is to already harbor a universal conclusion about the idea of such a person. "A tiger cannot change its stripes." That is a scary thought! And who among us has not found ourselves in a behavior shared by the characteristics of our case study? Who has not deceived someone, kept something that did not belong to us, snuck out at night, "borrowed" Mom's car, or engaged in any number of such common youthful adventures? If we can admit that these youthful adventures are indeed common, and we are arguing that such behavior is the "nature" of the criminal class, then how is it that the behavior comes so naturally to the public at large—and how did you manage to shake off the stripes of such a natural behavior? If we are arguing that such behavior can only develop, then what are we saying about ourselves?

I can remember watching a "Funniest Videos" television show and seeing a parent filming the mess left in his house by an unknown intruder who had the obvious "calling card" of dragging cooking flour throughout the house . . . and then the camera zoomed in on a broom closet and opened it, only to find a child of no more than three years of age covered in this flour and still holding the jar of flour. The first words out of the child's mouth were, "I didn't do it." I remember it being not only funny but adorable, as well. Why? It was funny and adorable because we understand that this is what kids do at this age. Before they can strategize what they will wear the following day, they have stolen, hidden from the responsibility in a lie, and made their getaway in a broom closet! If we were truly convinced about our earlier argument, then we would not be laughing at this video. We would be saddened because we would be certain that this child already has a nature of crime and that he cannot avoid the behavior with new learning. Why do we not lock children away and keep them as dumb as possible? Because we know that people can indeed change! Because we were at one time this child! Because our children are even today starring in their own videos! We cannot believe that people cannot change their stripes because we have seen too many drug addicts recover, too many prostitutes escape their life, too many bigots open their mind, too many children evolve out of childish behaviors—and we ourselves have made too many changes in our lives. We ourselves are living fossils of change.

When we lie, we choose to lie. When we tell the truth, it is also a choice. Every behavior is a choice. So how does a person learn to make different choices? When a child makes a choice undesired by the parent, what does the parent set out to do? Do we not share the same goal with our criminals? Isn't the goal to have the criminal make new choices, choices that we feel are more acceptable? How do we do that? What options are at our disposal?

Maybe if, once the person was convicted of a crime, he was immediately hanged in the town square, it might eliminate that criminal as a threat and deter other criminals. But we merely need look backwards in our history to see that this strategy has already been tested. Without fail, the rate of crime only increased. In fact, as we examine every extreme measure, surprisingly, rate of crime increases. Besides, we have to keep our options within the context of what is possible. A more realistic option is imprisoning the criminal and leaving him in a culture of solitude, left to his own devices.

Or being proactive during his stay in prison and making whatever efforts we can to redirect what it is that motivates him in life. Let's face it: we have already concluded that crime is not a nature, it is a choice, and as is the case with any choice it is influenced by our experiences and our circumstances. The only thing that really separates the criminal from one of our own family members is the different experiences and the different circumstances.

Why do we assume that educating a criminal is merely helping him commit more sophisticated crimes? Why can't we assume that an education can give this person the cognitive and psychological tools to make more acceptable choices?

It is hard for me to be unbiased in this discussion because one of my closest friends was a misfit at an early age. He was sent to prison with a life sentence at the age of seventeen, after spending the majority of his youth in and out of juvenile detention centers. The structure of prison as punishment did not alter his behavior in any positive manner, because even after going to prison he spent ten and a half years in the prison's disciplinary segregation units. However, after being exposed to some educational opportunities, he made the choice to change his life.

Our second argument/question needs to be reworded to even be acknowledged. To ask why we should do good things for those who have done bad things is indeed a topic for address, but the real question being asked is why we should do good things for prisoners, or, say, bad people. That qualifies the question, because if a child does something "bad," we do not consider not doing good for the child. So therefore the initial question is better qualified as, "Why should we do good things for prisoners – not because they have done a bad thing, but because they are bad people?" To question otherwise, we would be forced to hold all of our society to the same standard and let's be honest enough to admit that we are not going to do that, and that we have only one class of people in mind with such a question. Not overlooking the obvious faults of such a prejudice, let's address the question with honest inquiry and with as little emotion as possible.

For starters, we have to isolate the status of any consequence. Meaning, we need to conclude that a consequence is either good, or bad, or neither. We know of bad consequences, and of good consequences; do we know of a consequence that is neither? Since a consequence is a product of a behavior, then it must also hold true that any behavior is either good or bad. Every behavior has a consequence as we learned from the great scientist Isaac Newton who taught us that every action has a reaction. So all behavior is either good or bad. Let's say that again: all behavior is either good behavior or bad behavior! Since we only have two options for behavior, then defining good and bad behavior becomes easier. Good behavior is simply any that is without bad, and bad behavior is any that is without good. So if you are not doing bad, then you are doing good, and vice versa. Now let's ask the question again: Why do good for those who are bad? We are good because we behave without bad, and they are bad because they behave without good. So I ask you, if you are not doing good for these people, then what are you doing? Before you say "nothing," let's consider "nothing." For instance, a man enters a hospital with a gunshot wound to his chest. He is seeking help. The resident doctor just watches on as this man dies. By "doing nothing," the doctor has done bad. The key word is doing! A doctor's obligation is to help people with medical needs. But the doctor has a greater obligation than that, as do we all. If we removed the doctor from the hospital and the doctor simply looked on as this man died in, say, a park, he will still have done bad. The reason is because allowing bad is to deprive good, and depriving good is still a behavior, whether you call it "nothing" or not. It is everyone's obligation to do good because anything else would be bad.

So the answer to "Why should we do good for bad people?" is because "anything else would be uncivilized." If we are not doing good for bad people, then we are doing bad for bad people, and the only thing separating the two is mere condition. Doing bad for any person is still doing bad. We should not be working on ways to do bad for isolated populations of people; rather, we should work on developing good into our character all of the time, no matter who is on the receiving end. That is our obligation to society.

The statistical evidence speaks for itself in favor of education for prisoners, but let me share with you my own experience. You see, this friend of mine that I introduced you to is really me. He is not a metaphor! I have made terrible mistakes in my life, and one terrible 30 second mistake thirteen years ago cost me my liberty. I was 17 years old then, and I am now 30. The furthest I made it in school was a week's worth of my freshman year of high school. This is not a sob story targeting your sympathy; it is simply background so I can establish that I was indeed a "screw up," and, yes, a criminal. In fact, I have been locked away from society since a very early age.

As a person of the world, I was simply pushed over by a good wind. My behavior was driven by what others expected of me, and what was left for me as an example. Obviously, the world you are exposed to as such a person of the world is critical to how you end up as a person of the world. The good news is that since that is true, such a person is really susceptible to positive influence by the change of the world around him. So it is anything but a sob story. It is a very inspiring story, because I am indeed the living fossil of positive change, and that education is indeed a powerful tool for positive change. You see, I was living in a supermax segregation unit about one ounce shy of courage from taking my own life to escape it, when I was exposed to an "educational" opportunity that, in effect, reshaped the rest of my life. Education gave me not only a new confidence in making decisions for myself, but it also gave me more understanding and many more options. It helped develop my critical thinking skills, and it made it possible to better weigh behaviors and consequences. It just really gave me new direction in life and in a real sense it saved my life.

The bottom line with this entire argument is that we cannot risk not helping. The vast majority of prisoners are going to return home. They are going to be our neighbors, our trash men, our maintenance men, etc. They are going to be around our loved ones. The question really comes down to: what kind of prisoner do you want living next to you? No matter how you feel about the subject, the reality is that these prisoners are indeed coming home, and you do have the power to help shape what kind of neighbor they will be. Why education? Because it is the one science that does show us overwhelmingly that it works.

"Warren Stanley" is a pseudonym for the author of this essay, who is a prisoner at Wabash Valley Correctional Facility.