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Teaching Ethics via Sympathy

I recently had an opportunity to teach an ethics course to inmates at the Mahoning County Juvenile Justice Center in Youngstown, Ohio. The motivation for the course was not only to provide the juveniles in the Center with additional programming and educational opportunities, but also to teach them some traditional moral theories in the hope that they would evaluate their past and future actions accordingly. Although the goal of the course was to teach the students traditional moral theories and their application, traditional approaches to teaching ethics are not appropriate given the students' unique educational, sociological, and psychological factors. Consequently, I developed a course to teach them moral concepts and reasoning without high level theorizing, by trying to develop a natural Humean sympathy as the basis for moral deliberation and action. In this paper, I explain 1) how the course developed the students' natural sympathy, 2) how sympathy can serve as a heuristic for more complicated moral reasoning in traditional ethical theories, and 3) some interesting implications for public policy regarding moral education and recidivism, as well as for teaching ethics courses generally.