

CORRUPT THE YOUTH

PHILOSOPHY OUTREACH PROGRAM

In Spring 2016 I founded *Corrupt the Youth*, a philosophy outreach program that brings philosophy to students attending under-resourced high schools. Corrupt the Youth takes its name from the Greek philosopher Socrates, who was sentenced to death for allegedly ‘corrupting’ the youth. Socrates encouraged the Greek youth to question and, if necessary, oppose, the political and moral conventions of their society. The goal of the Corrupt the Youth philosophy outreach program is to continue that project.

We work with high school juniors at Eastside Memorial High School, a Title 1 school in east Austin, Texas.¹ Corrupt the Youth aims to bridge the gap between what students are learning in high school and what they will be expected to do in college. Part of the motivation in exposing students to philosophy at this particular stage in their high school career is to prepare them for the high-level texts with which they will be engaging, and the level of abstraction that many college-level courses require. But students can benefit from philosophy specifically because it can be useful in helping them think through the big problems and questions we all face: Are we morally obligated to help others? What is power, who has it, and why? Are the laws just? Students from disadvantaged backgrounds are rarely asked to share and develop their own views on the answers to these important questions. Corrupt the Youth aims to give the students an opportunity to clarify their own thoughts and to discover the power of their own voices.

While most philosophy outreach programs function as after-school programs, Corrupt the Youth runs like a traditional class. The curriculum is designed so that each lesson builds upon a skill or idea developed in the previous lesson. The course mimics an introductory philosophy class, so students cover topics ranging from epistemology, to ethics, to the philosophy of mind. Typically, two or three mentors from UT’s department of philosophy (undergraduates, graduate students, or professors) lead a class. We open the day’s lesson by introducing a key question. This question introduces the central topic for the day’s class. Students then focus on a short, manageable philosophy text. Students might then participate in a short activity or discussion to further their engagement with and deepen their understanding of the text. Classes conclude by connecting the key question and philosophical text to a broader question or issue.

For instance, a sample class might begin by asking the following key question: Are we good people when no one is watching? This is the question Socrates poses in “The Ring of Gyges.” In this dialogue, which the students read, Socrates suggests that most people would not behave morally without the fear of being caught and punished. We then ask students to apply this lesson to a contemporary issue: police corruption. Using the key question and the text as a guide, we encourage students to respond to the question: should police officers be required to wear body cameras? This gives students the opportunity to apply an abstract moral consideration to a real-life problem we are faced with today.

The goal of Corrupt the Youth is to provide students with a framework through which to understand, critically evaluate, and address some of the unique issues that we face today (like police brutality, dog-whistle politics, and xenophobia, to name a few). But the program primarily aims to empower students to be advocates for themselves. Through this program, students engage with complex moral and logical entanglements that they can begin to unpack and discuss, and in doing so, they not only gain tools for living, but also a sense of empowerment and agency.

¹ Title 1 schools are schools with high numbers or high percentages of children from low-income families.