
Civil Disobedience in the Arguments of Henry David Thoreau, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Socrates

Civil disobedience can be defined in a number of different ways: in its most raw form, “civil disobedience is the refusal to comply with certain laws or to pay taxes and fines, as a peaceful form of political protest because of moral objections to said laws”. While Henry David Thoreau was the first individual to illustrate directly on the topic of civil disobedience in his 1849 essay, “Civil Disobedience”, the actions taken by Socrates in *The Apology* and *Crito* could contradict the alleged morality in breaking the law.

Martin Luther King Jr. further expresses the righteousness in these vigilante types of behaviors by his protests against black segregation laws and in “A Letter from Birmingham Jail”. However, is civil disobedience really justified? Is an outright disregard for the government really befitting? What would be the result of civil disobedience on a larger scale? Despite the arguments made by Thoreau and King, I am justifying, like Socrates, that civil disobedience is never acceptable.

Socrates has an interesting position in this essay because he did not inherently break any laws in his own mind. In Plato’s, *The Apology*, Socrates, the meddlesome gadfly, was accused by Athens for the corrupting the minds of the youth with his philosophical teachings and undermining the gods. Socrates did “argue” his case in some ways. He also claims that an oracle at Delphi asserted that there was no one wiser than Socrates. Socrates says, “I am wiser than this human being. For probably neither of us knows anything noble and good, but he supposes he knows something when he does not know, while I, just as I do not know, do not even suppose that I do. I am likely to be a little bit wiser than he in this very thing: that whatever I do not know, I do not even suppose I know” (Plato 70). He is implying that he is the wisest because he knows he is not the wisest.

Nevertheless, he is still determined to be guilty by Athens. While this may or may not be true, he accepted his punishment whole-heartedly because of his belief that the citizen owes his existence to the laws. On the other hand, the concept of civil disobedience assumes the priority of selfish benefits, “No act of civil disobedience can be morally justified, because such an act is immoral at base, in supposing the superiority of the individual to social interests. The civil disobedient acts out of self-regard, in deliberate defiance of the will of his community and that can never be right” (Cohen 134).

When in jail, in Plato’s *Crito*, Socrates demonstrates the significance of this quote when he is

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given the opportunity to escape. He claims, “And even who has been done injustice, then, must not do injustice in return, as the many suppose, since one must in no way do injustice” (Plato 107). Socrates realizes that to do injustice due to injustice would challenge everything that he stands for as a philosopher.

He explains to Crito that if citizens chose to disobey and break the laws they did not prefer, than the laws would no longer hold value and the city would turn to chaos. Finally, he is warned that if he were to leave jail, then he would be an unwelcomed fugitive. How could he continue his teachings if he had committed injustice himself? Crito accepts the terms and Socrates is soon after put to death with the ingestion hemlock.

Perhaps it should be called “selfish disobedience” rather than civil: the person committing civil disobedience does not care about the law, but only personal goals and gain: a callous neglect for the licit rights of everyone around them. I am reasoning that Martin Luther King Junior is one of these callous individuals whose protests were done out of selfish interests, “At it’s core, the letter was a proclamation of black self-sufficiency” (Reider).

This is a direct statement from Jonathan Riedner, a critic of King, in an article entitled, “Dr. King’s Righteous Fury”. Reider further expresses in his writing that King thoughtlessly looks at the American dream through black eyes: which is why his references should be taken so lightly. King describes blacks as the “instruments to somebody else’s dream”. How can King make this claim yet continually ask why blacks have not been given anything, “Don’t you ever think anything is going to be given to us in this struggle?”

But they didn’t give us any land...and they haven’t given us anything” (Reider)! Give, give, and give: King sounds like a teenager with an unwarranted sense of entitlement. Even Socrates would tell King that is unjust to put fourth the laws he desires at the expense of society’s current laws because he, in fact, owes his existence to the laws as they are now.

Socrates does have the utmost respect for the gods, in fact, it is up for interpretation as to whether his immediate loyalties lie with the gods or with the city, “...the laws in Hades will not receive you favorably there...then let it go, Crito, and let us act in this way, since this is the way the god is leading” (Plato 114). King, too, believes in vertical order. In “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” he says, “A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or law of God” (King). While both men do seem to revere a higher power, the key difference is that Socrates knows that he must obey the laws of Athens in order to respect the gods.

King, on the other hand, thinks that it is the “moral responsibility” of men to break unjust laws. This is contradictory to what one might read in Romans 13: 1-2, “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. He

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who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted”.

King should have taken a more Socratic approach to his protests if he wanted to remain in alignment with what is vertical order. All in all, selfish disobedience is the pursuit of personal interests with an insensitive disregard for the overall well being of the community and should never be justified.

This claim does, however, raise another question, what does one do if they do not believe in the justness of laws in society or within their community? Thoreau presents readers with three options: obey, amend or transcend, “Unjust laws exist: shall we be content to obey them, or shall we endeavor to amend them, and only obey them until we have succeeded, or shall we transgress them at once?” Thoreau, in summary, says that most believe that they must wait until they have persuaded the majority to alter them because if they were to act in opposition, “the remedy would be worse than the evil”.

He advises to transcend the laws: to remove oneself from the machine (government). However, by acting upon transcendence, one is acting in deliberate disrespect for the law, “civil disobedience undermines the respect for the law, and allows for the civil disobedient to take the law into their own hands” (Cohen 142). This sounds like the idea of a vigilante: someone who undertakes the laws without authority because they believe current officials to be inadequate. “A Call for Unity” by the clergymen from Birmingham, Alabama, appeals for steps of action that are honest and open in negotiation to prevent, exactly, this type of behavior, “When rights are consistently denied, a cause should be pressed in the courts and in negotiations among local leaders, and not in the streets.

We appeal to both our white and Negro citizenry to observe the principals of law and order and common sense”. Even Socrates comprehends that if he was to escape and leave, it would result in shame on himself and all of Athens: he would have done a wrong for a wrong; it is precisely what the clergymen are trying to convey to the black extremists and King as they protest about Birmingham. They wish for the radicals to take Thoreau’s second option and amend the laws.

Democracy also provides for the amendment of laws. As mentioned in the former, Socrates says that as citizens, we owe our existence to the laws and the city. We must obey. Democracy acts as a voice of the individuals. Now, Thoreau does argue this when he claims, “All voting is sort of gaming...it is only expressing to men feebly your desire that is should prevail”. Thoreau advocates that if you vote and you are not the majority, then why should you respect that majority. He says to act with such behavior is weak.

But why, rather than break laws to achieve one’s way, why not just work with such dedication to

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sway the vote of the majority? If King and Thoreau had put as much effort into breaking the law as they did trying to sway votes, they could have remained out of prison and gained the respect of many more individuals. A vote is the clearest way to make our voices heard which is why we must obey and amend. Civil disobedience is not ever acceptable because as long as lawful channels remain open disregard and disrespect for the law cannot ever be just.

The Purge is a film about what would happen if the government was nonexistent for twelve hours. During this time, people kill, steal, and commit vicious crimes. I think this film, while it is only a film, represents what civil disobedience would look like on a larger scale. If people were governed by the inherent laws that they believed to be right, then utter chaos would be among us. Not everyone would be behaving peacefully and calm writing stories at their cabin on Walden Pond. I guess you would say I have a similar perspective to Thomas Hobbes.

King and Thoreau were both selfish individuals who chose to take the law into their own hands. I do not wish to convey that I have surveyed every conceivable case that attempts justifying their civil disobedience. However, I do believe that the primary disputes in regards to King and Thoreau, have been dealt with. As Socrates emphasizes, all citizens owe themselves to the city by which they are governed and therefore, civil disobedience is never acceptable.

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